Golden Blood

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Golden Blood

by Cosmicserenity

Summary

The Blood Killer.
In 1870's Paris, it's an alias everyone knows- including Jack Crawford, the chief investigator of the murders caused by this Serial Killer, and Will Graham- the man somehow tasked to kill the prime suspect: and at a party of all places.
But when the assassination plot goes horribly wrong and Will ends up living under Duke Hannibal Lecter, one of the most mysterious men in France as well as the elusive killer that the world's been hunting, he soon finds that the ideals of murder and the virtues of Good and Evil have become too muddled for any man to tell apart.

Now trapped in a game of love, hatred and morbid curiosity, Will will soon find himself with only three missions:
Survive that mansion without going insane, kill the killer, and don't fall in love with Hannibal Lecter.
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A culmination of the books, the movies, the show, and my own lil' ✨creative spins✨ on Hannibal/The Hannibal Tetralogy.

Author's Prelude

Hello, and welcome to Golden Blood!

I'd like to get a few things squared away before we begin on this journey of ours, mainly because this story has a lot of subtext/context to it that needs to be explained.

1-Of course, warnings for violence, abuse, and canon-typical manipulation. Essentially, there's a helluva lot of death, murder, suicide, and just bonkers shit in this story that only get more intense as it goes on (Act II is a DOOZY), and they're all pretty graphic in both detail and description- not to mention the sheer toxicity that comes from this relationship in the first place. Fair warning, babes!

2- This story is largely based off of two cultural eras: Rococo and Edwardian, and takes place in an alternate universe of early/mid 19th century France. Because this is a fusion of sorts- and because hey, this is *fanfiction*- not everything will be totally historically accurate.

3- Slight changes have been made to fit the storyline. Nothing too OOC, though.

4- As stated previously, a large portion of this story has been pre-written. That means there are gonna be pretty consistent/fast uploads! *However-*

5- There may be a point in which the series stops for a few days if the uploads catch up to the most recent point I've written. In the case that it does happen, there's your preliminary notice.

6- This fic is meant to be more story-based than romance-based, and by the time the story ends, the ship pairings could end up going either way/changing from the original plan. I'm both indecisive and spontaneous- sadly.

7- Now I don't know if anyone will, but: If you ever want to create any fanwork of GB, be it fanart, fanfic, or just a cool ass meme or suggestion, go ahead! You have my absolute blessing, and all I would ask would be that you credit my ao3 user in your description and post a link to your work via either PM or in the comment section of any chapter of this fic.

And, I think that's it! Thanks so much for reading, hopefully you enjoy, and *a bientot*!

no. 1- Bezerka

“William.”

“Jack.” Will Graham mocked Jack’s scornful tone, stripping bulbus seeds from the cattails he had plucked and throwing them into the water as he sat by the riverside. He couldn’t find in himself the strength to look at him.

With silvering hair and drooping eyes resembling that of an old bloodhound, Jack Crawford approached the riverbank where Will stooped, grunting as he struggled to maintain his balance on the grassy terrain and standing eerily close to face the slouched back of the man who had again failed to prepare for the impending duty that sat burning on the backs of his muddied heels.

“James told me of your whereabouts.”

“He would not be my guard if he hadn't. After all, every guard in this dreadful mansion is willing to vomit information at your feet if it means you’ll pass them a second glance.”

Will waved him away in a fruitless sort of action, throwing another catkin into the water and twisting the emptied stem in between his fingers. He liked to watch them sink, to watch the fish nibble at their pollen before swimming off and determining that they didn’t like the taste. When Will would throw another in the water and watch those same fish return looking for a different meal in the same poison, it made him laugh; but then he'd be reminded that he was doing the exact same thing in his own life, and his mood would die all over again. A cycle.

“The reasoning of their willingness to aid me is neither of our concerns. What is our concern- particularly *yours*- is whether you will be able to execute your mission tonight.” Jack said, peering into the river and watching their reflections shift in the water. “Are you ready to do this?”

“Seeing as how Father has sent you here to fetch me, I assume you are already aware of the correct answer.”

“I didn’t come here to hear another reiteration of the ‘correct’ answer, William.” Jack responded. “I came to hear your own answer, spoken through your own lips.”

“And why do you want to hear my answer, Jack?”

“I simply wish to know that I'm not sending you into the den of a monster with a muddled head, is all.”

“So, in other words, you want me to say something to make you feel guiltless once I kill a man while under your careful watch.”

Jack kicked a rock in the water. “Hannibal Lecter is evil personified, William; he drains the blood out of his victims' bodies for the *thrill* of it. You should know that you have to do this.”

“Is this supposed to serve as your way of motivating me?”

“It is supposed to serve as a reminder that if there was any other way to go about this, your father and I would have taken a less foolhardy option. One that wouldn’t be endangering your livelihood as such.”

That was impossible to believe, and Will told him so by the way he scooted away from him and closer to the other cluster of cattails that sat unwasted to his right.

“No, you wouldn't have. You and I both know that my wellbeing is the least thing you're concerned about.” It was a heavy statement that did nothing to lift the spirits of the conversation, monotonous and exhausted.

“You won’t be alone, if that’s what worries you.” Jack didn’t refute Will’s earlier claim, but Will hadn't expected him to. Jack Crawford was no liar; he would never say things simply for the sake of saying them. And if he did, he would have no qualms with letting the world know he didn’t mean what he said.

“That doesn’t ease my discomfort.” Will responded, letting his fingers linger on a catkin before deciding against plucking it from its stem.

“What would ease your discomfort, then?”

“Nothing.”

Will replied to Jack's loaded question with an edge in his voice, but still didn't look up. His eyes were too preoccupied, now counting the dragonflies that dipped on and off the river's surface with the entranced bobbing of his pupils. There were three, today. A low number for the beginnings of September.

Noting Will’s stubborn response but childish avoidances of the depth that came with a face to face conversation, Jack sighed, and extended his hand for the younger man to take as he jerked his head towards the Graham manor. “You're to be killing a killer, Will. You're doing God's work.”

“I'm to be killing a man who's *presumed* to be a killer. That's not God's work- that's insanity. And you know it is.” After a bit of contemplation, Will took Jack’s hand and hoisted himself up, patting down dirt dusted pants and tearing his eyes away from the river with a reluctance that felt unnatural.

“Not if I'm right, and he truly is the one who killed them. Who killed her.”

Jack nudged him, the gesture only there to ease the mood yet failing miserably, and walked back towards the manor’s gated entrance with Will trailing lazily beside him.

Will didn't care whether Jack was right or not, and almost told him so, but kept his mouth shut. In situations like these, no matter what he wanted, what he cared for, or what he detested; it was all unimportant. Then again, it had always been unimportant.

That was why Will was going to be a murderer by the end of the night; and a murderer of a Duke, no less.

In a thoughtful hindsight, Will didn't know why or how Jack had come to the conclusion that Hannibal Lecter was a murderer; because in the one time that he asked, Jack only murmured a half-hearted statement of 'I have my resources' that was expected to sate Will's needless desire for knowledge. It didn't. But Jack continued on his hunt with his eyes on Hannibal and his gun fully loaded all the same, trekking into danger without ever accounting for the consequences that surely were to come.

Dubbed the mysterious 'Blood Killer' by sensationalized newspaper headlines and 'The Black Doctor' by gossiping nobles who had nothing better to do in their spare time, Crawford often publicly theorized the enigmatic murderer to be a man who came from a broken home and had subsequently acquired a broken psyche, as well. But when he was around Will, and could freely accuse Duke Hannibal Lecter as the killer without receiving strange looks from nobles and worried whispers from peasants, Jack described him as the type of man who killed his victims slowly. Creatively. Well.

Like a candlelight latching onto an old curtain, the alleged number of murders by Lecter accumulated to staggering amounts. First were a few peasant workers by the edge of the capital, then, a foreign count who had come to the country for diplomatic purposes, and most recently, Jack's own wife- who Jack had the displeasure of seeing slumped over in their dining room with her intestines tied around her throat and a burning candle half-melted in the cavity in her torso.

After that, the absence of actual evidence to indict Hannibal was rendered insignificant in Jack's vengeful vision, and Will had watched him spend every day trying to destroy the life of the demon who had supposedly taken his only love. When the systems of lawful justice failed to aid him in those attempts, Jack turned to Will's father for a more sinister alternative, and the two had finally forged a plan to kill Hannibal after 9 months of forming and reforming their strategy over tea times and secret letters.

And the scapegoat of that plan was none other than Will himself. The twenty-two year old only son of the decrepit Graham family, the foolish boy who had always remained desperate to gain his father's attention, and the eternally inept man who was left to do nothing but serve under the demands of the only family he had; the family who knew Will would always obey.

"Sir Graham! Sir Crawford!" The footguards tensed as they stood on either side of the opened wrought iron gate, their rifles tucked at their hips serving as frivolous displays of power, and displayed a curt bow as Will and Jack approached the front gates of the manor.

"I thank you for your assistance again, you two." Jack nodded, smacking Will's back like he would a stag he had captured. "He would have been seated there by that riverbank for hours if you hadn't told me of his location."

Will rotated his shoulders to ease the stinging pain that came forth from Jack's hand in between his shoulder blades, cutting a glare towards the footguards and controlling the immature urge to roll his eyes into the back of his head. They were guards, he reminded

himself. Guards who cared, guards who knew that the annulment of their work contracts would be finalized all too soon, and guards who ardently wanted future job security.

“Yes, your constant willingness to relay information to anyone who asks is *always* delightful. After all, I believe that there is nothing on earth that could negate the necessity of two loyal lackeys."

"There must be no reason to react in such a way, Sir Graham." One of the men mustered up a smile, the sort that only existed to feign a necessary sympathy, and glued it in between his lips. When the smile went unmatched, it faded.

“We are the guards of the Manor, Sir." The other guard cleared his throat and let himself succumb to the agitated air that sat on all of their shoulders. "We have to make sure you’re taken care of.”

How fraternal.

“Prepare the carriage for us, you two. We must hurry if we want to make Sir William’s appearance in the soiree as flawless as possible.”

The guards nodded with a synchronized wink and rushed to the stables with an ignorance that Will envied.

“What did you tell them, Jack?” Will asked, ensuring that the guards were well out of earshot before mumbling out his question in a slew of hushed utterances. As he spoke, he and Jack stepped up from cobblestone and onto gravel, purposely slowing their pace as they rounded the intricately designed fountain that stood in the middle of the walkway. “The ‘excuse’ for my attendance, I mean.”

“I only told them that you are attending the soiree with the intention to accompany Lady Margaret.” Jack replied, stopping at the manor's entrance. A pair of maids emerged on either side of the door, waiting for an order that Will would never give, and stood like mannequins frozen in a timeless spiral of indentured servitude.

"'Accompany', or 'Court'?"

"I left that aspect up to interpretation."

Will wondered if the news had reached Molly herself. Likely not; for if it had, she would have been at the manor already.

“Either way," Jack coughed into a balled fist, his eyes drifting from the maids in the doorway before returning to Will. "Bathe, and make haste with your changing. You have work to do.”

The maids took Jack’s words as their own stir to action, with one rushing into the home to prepare Will’s bath and the other going to put together his formal garments, and Jack moved back towards the gate to oversee the stablehand’s work on their transport without a second thought.

“I don’t want to do this, Jack. You know I don't.” The words came from impulsive thinking and subconscious anxiety, loud and echoed in the space that now existed between the two of them, but Will didn’t stop talking. “And you know this won't bring her back, either. ”

A flinch reverberated off of Jack's back, obvious and uninhibited. “I know it won't. But I'm going to see this through. And regardless of your wants, you will be the one to finish this.”

It was a heavy retort, sticking onto Will’s lean figure like a humid August sweat all as he walked into the house, into the bathing quarters, sank into the bathing basin and let the water wrap around his body, and the finality of it was one that now added to the metaphysical anvil that pressed on the young man’s mind. Thankfully he had managed to coerce his servants long ago into not aiding him in the process of bathing and dressing himself, for there was nothing he desired to do more than rest a segment of his face under the water and brood alone as he kept his eyes on his now limited future.

He took his time in fiddling with the ochre flower petals that had been dumped into the bath, gradually lifting one into the air between two long fingers to watch its veins pulsate under the sun’s blazing rays, and felt his lower jaw shift against the taut tendons in his throat as he let his arm fall limp back into the water with a wet crash.

Will had enough of a moral compass to know that theoretically, what he was doing was a good thing. He was just in his actions, a light shining through the darkest of tempests like a modern day Aquila, and the murder of the Duke would forever be regarded in the pits of his soul as an action brought forth from necessity. There was no room in the world for a selfish killer, and Will found no remorse for the man who could murder others without a second thought.

Instead, the vines of apprehension that had wrapped themselves around his neck came from his own aversion to the unknown.

He hadn’t told anyone, but Will had imagined the Duke’s murder every night for the past two weeks. How his eyes would bulge as he clenched his stomach, how blood would bubble from his lips and spill onto his overcoat as his body burned from the inside out, how he would die before his sins were repented for. Laying in bed in the dead of the night, Will had been letting his imagination run wild in a grotesque routine, blinking slowly to the thoughts of what the venom would do and how shocked the guests would be as they watched the man they revered as a pinnacle of power become reduced to nothing but a mess on the floor below them; and to that image, he would fall asleep with a smile on his face.

It would only be later in the morning that he would realize what he had thought and how he had reacted, and then he would feel himself begin to shiver in his nightclothes.

Will wasn’t afraid to kill Hannibal. As paranoid as he was about it whenever the thought lingered on his head for too long, he wasn’t afraid of his own death, either. But he was petrified of the person he would become once he would take his first life, because he didn't know who that person would be.

The bath had gone cold by the time Will got out of it, drying himself with a towel, and he slipped his clothes on slowly just to give himself more time to think of the scenario he had

somehow found himself in and why he had found himself in it.

They were incessant thoughts that would serve no purpose five minutes from the time they were constructed, but served their purpose in aiding him in his anxious dissociation well as he stepped now fully clothed from the bathing quarters and back towards the exit, heeled shoes making tip-taps across the floor until they reached the rough texture of broken stone and stopped beside the gate. The fiery hues of the sun had fizzled out into just darkening violets, and a small part of him looked forward to being able to see that wounded sky again from his bedchambers once the mission was complete and he could finally sink into a state of an paradoxically contented restlessness.

“Are you ready, Will?” Jack asked the question one last time, expecting an response that Will knew would be a lie if it were said.

He said it anyway.

“I'm ready.”

With that, they clambered into the carriage without incident or conversation, and Jack motioned for the coachman to begin their ride off to the Duke’s chateau. As Will felt himself ride away, taking note of how the manor slowly grew smaller as the carriage rode around winding pine trees and ducked up and down messily paved hillside roads, he kept his eyes on the one window that seemed to shine brighter than the others and tried his hardest to discern his father’s sunken face amidst the shadows.

no. 2- Allegretto

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"You will do it after the music begins, but before the celebration becomes too populated."

Jack was quick to murmur directions as he stepped from the carriage, nodding to fellow guests with polite smiles and forced gestures of camaraderie as they neared the Chateau's front gates. Will trailed beside him, shaking under his outwardly perceived wall of indifference, and sauntered on while staring at his shoes in an attempt to keep himself centered. It still wasn't working, though, none of his 'coping methods' were- no matter how hard he tried or how many times he tore and tore again the scrap pieces of paper that sat in his right overcoat pocket. He could never be centered. Always skewed off in directions that he could not control.

He had quite obviously been anxious prior to his arrival, the thought of Fate's vicious touch still lingering all over his body and leaving acidic tingles to sear all of the hairs on his neck; but now, that fear had transformed into one that was more focused on the people that bumped and bashed against his trembling shoulders and sweating hands rather than the nature of a future assassination.

There were too many people. Too many eyes. Like soaring into the spectacular sun after being confined in a calamitous prison cell for years, or looking plainly into the eyes of a God all-powerful after knowingly committing every sin known to man and beast alike, their stares burned; and every gaze, whether it was directed at him or not, made his teeth clatter in his jaw and scrape at the edges of his tongue with every second that passed.

And if he were to be completely honest, which he knew then and forever that he would never be, he only wanted to return to his quarters and remain there until he learned how to breathe again; or at least go to an area less populated as to stop the high-pitched ringing in his ears. But he was here with Jack, and Jack cared little about discomfort when his wife's presumed killer was a few hundred steps away.

"I know, Jack."

"When I send him to you, have two glasses prepared. One with the cantarella, one for you. Waste no time in giving him the drink." Jack continued, slipping the small bottle of poison into Will's hand and waiting for him to stuff it down into his pocket. When he did, Jack quickened his paces.

"I *know*."

"Under no circumstances should you allow yourself to get overwhelmed. Avoid the gazes of the partygoers and keep your mind on the task ahead."

"I-"

Too late. Will looked from the ground and up to Jack, fixing his mouth to retort with another, fiercer reminder that the plan was simple enough for him to understand without receiving the same slow-witted and gratuitous cycle of steps, but froze mid sentence as he absorbed the space that stood behind his friend and caught another stare from another stranger. She was younger, her gloved hands at her torso and her pinned hair whipping about due to both an occasionally wild wind and a well-intentioned wonder, and persistently pinched at her fingertips in an anxious action she surely didn't notice herself. She was looking for someone, trying to find someone she knew wasn't there and had likely met Will's eyes purely by accident; but the truth of the situation didn't prevent his gaze from falling back on the ground, nor did it keep his throat from souring with the taste of nausea thick on his tastebuds. Infernal stares could never be seen for long.

"I know, Jack."

"You have to get this right, Will." Jack said, acting as if he were speaking from experience. "You have to do this for the victims. For Bella. For me."

For him. Of course it was for him, it had always been for *him*. It was why they were there, pinning a death sentence to a man who possibly didn't even deserve it; why Will's sanity was dangling like a carrot from a line of spider's thread. He adored Jack in a way he could adore no other in his life, had loved Bella even more before her death, and yet he could find only an intense displeasure in the sight of how easy it was for Jack to have taken advantage of that admiration and use it simply for an ill-placed need for vengeance. More than that, he detested how he himself was so desperate for validation that he'd still do anything just for Jack to say he was proud of him, even this, because he knew that his father never would and craved for a paternal replacement in a place where there couldn't and shouldn't have been one.

"William?"

Will blinked, once, then twice, then a host of times, finding the words to speak buried under mixed emotions. "I know. I know."

And with that, they entered into the Chateau.

It was a large scale party, one bigger than any other celebration he had attended; and had been occurring year after year for the past thirty-nine as a form of exuberance, livelihood and poseurism on the Lecters' behalf. According to the murmurs Will had heard from the guests who had passed him, Hannibal's uncle had been the first one to host these parties in his own house, many years past, and had continued to do so up until a two decades ago; when a tray of turkish delights were the final instrument in clogging up his arteries and making the man fall dead on the top of his dinner table. Stroke, some said. Heart attack, said others.

If Jack were still there beside him, he'd probably say poison; a last ditch effort for a then twenty-one year old Hannibal to get rid of the nuisance that had been his guardian after the rest of his family had already been 'taken care of'. Quite a hypocritical statement given the bug venom being poured by shaking hands into Hannibal's champagne glass as Will stood in the far corner of the great hall with his back to the crowd, he thought, now quickly hidden by decorative plants that seemed to be far from their native lands with his eyes focused on the task in front of him.

Jack had left his side the moment the two entered into the party, scouting for potential ‘problems’ and making menial conversation in the meantime so to keep any wandering eyes from finding themselves fixed to Will’s position just in case they saw something they shouldn’t have. Finding Hannibal himself was Will’s job, apparently, and so he took to finding him the moment that the poison was in the glass and he had mentally prepared himself for the forced conversation that was to follow. In minutes, footsteps, and a few half-genuine “I’m sorry”s muttered all as he maneuvered past the other partygoers, he finally saw him.

There he stood, pious, and magnificent, and consecrated beyond all expectation. There he stood, with his back straightened, his shoulders squared and his eyes filled with a distant emotion that Will was desperate to see more of as the night continued. There stood Hannibal, his target, mere feet away but close enough to gravitate all gazes towards him as he spoke with his guests and remained oblivious to the fact that the world revolved around him. And there stood Will, with his eyes transfixed on the man in front of him and his heart bruising itself with the booms that would thump against his ribcage.

When they finally saw each other, *saw* each other, with bronze eyes falling on black ones and an empty smile meeting a fake one, did Hannibal see Will’s anxiety wrapped over him like a woolen coat; see how it made his back sweat and his eyes redden? Or did he see more, noticing the hostility and observing the malicious intent that lied in the corner of Will’s irises? It was unrealistic to even assume such ideas, brazen and unnecessary when weighed against the burden of the night in itself, but Will was struck with an unfeigned wonder regardless as everything became muted against the sounds of thunderous footsteps stopping inches away from the Duke and the steady rumble of courteous speech escaping thin peony lips.

“Sir Graham, how lovely to have you. You look wonderful.”

Will was surprised that Hannibal knew his name; that he could say it with such ease, even. He said *'Sir Graham'* like he was reciting the title of an exquisite work of art, distant yet revering, and rolled every ‘r’ against the roof of his mouth with a fervor that felt almost purposely embellished. It wasn’t appreciated, nor flattering, and made snakes slither in Will's stomach.

“Please, the pleasure is mine alone.” Will grinned a smile that didn’t quite reach his eyes, the disingenuousness of the sentiment cleverly disguised behind elaborate inflections.

“I see you have two glasses.”

An astute observation.

“Ah, yes- I had made my rounds this way so as to propose a drink with you. As a sign of goodwill, and a show of my gratitude for inviting me to this celebration.” Will set the glasses on the table that sat to the left of them, in front of yet another potted plant, and purposely pushed one closer to Hannibal’s side.

“An action most appreciated, however unexpected.”

“Of course. As the sole heir to the Graham title, it would be my honor to forge a bridge of connection with you, Your Grace.” As if on cue, he bowed, closing his eyes with the succinct movement and tucking his hands at his sides. Even murderers deserved the proper respect.

“Well, I’m honored that you would go to such lengths to achieve this connection, Sir Graham. Especially given that as far as I seem to know, you’ve never attended one of my family's ceremonies." Hannibal was the only living person left in his family. The ceremonies weren't his family's, anymore.

“It is, and you’re right- I haven’t.” Will replied, arising from his bow and allowing the first traces of truth to slip into his sentence. He had to think fast when it came to his reply, something that hardly came easy to a man who dissociated into fishing fantasies more often than he ever cared to admit.

“But, I’m here now, and will be here for as long as you continue to hold these celebrations. After all,” He had gotten more excited, now settling in the ease of his lie. “In this world, it is much better to have more friends by your side then none, wouldn’t you agree?"

“When provided that explanation, I find it hard to challenge your proposal.”

Hannibal went to grab the drink from the table, but soon stopped to squint at a distant guest. When Will followed his eyes, turning his head around to face the crowd, all he could gather was the flash of navy and the bouncing of bobbed blonde hair striding away from their once still places in the overhead orchestra pit before the doors closed. Had they seen something? Did they know something? If they did, they chose not to reveal what they knew, and that was a fact that left him dangerously content on the ballroom floor.

By the time Will returned his focus to him, Hannibal had already lifted his champagne flute in the air and was preparing to toast, a lip print smeared on the rim of his glass. It was small, but enough to allow a breath of relief to escape through Will’s lips as he disguised his emotions under a thinly veiled layer of strained enthusiasm.

And with the clinks of their glasses, the swallows of their drinks and the steps into the next phase of their menial discussion, he relaxed his posture and waited for the inevitable to arrive.

Will would never describe himself as being impatient. He had a philosophy, one that stood in favor of letting time pass as it wanted and holding no breaths for the future to turn in his favor- but as the minutes ticked by and Hannibal’s glass began to empty, he felt an ever-swelling need for something to *change* as the crowd surrounding them began to thicken and antsy noblemen wrapped around the dancefloor with their partners in tow. Things were getting more crowded, more *suffocating* , and as his eyes darted from one side to another as his conversation with Hannibal dawdled on, he grew obsessively paranoid; clawing at his thighs through the fabric of his pockets, sweating profusely under the reflected lights of crystal chandeliers, counting and recounting the beats of the music that danced and frolicked around the gathering. Though he could feel no mental discomfort by any means, having made the corner of the ballroom his home, his stomach was in knots he could not release, and it was the sole incentive he needed to know something was wrong.

“Frankly, I am quite surprised to know that you would choose to speak with someone such as myself.” Will said it to deter Hannibal from the conversation, feeling his chest grow hot as he focused on the rhythmic movements of dancing guests, and cleared his throat.

“I see no reason why I shouldn’t. You are a nobleman, aren’t you?”

‘I have…” He found it difficult to say the words. “...been rumored to be mad, your Highness. And my family…is slowly becoming destitute.”

“I would hardly call you mad, Sir Graham- that, I feel is only a popular theory made by people with nothing to do and nowhere to go. But I have heard of your family’s fallen status, and I cannot help but ask why the wealthy Graham estate has fallen so. If there’s anything I can do to help, even.” Hannibal lifted his glass in the air and took a final sip.

“Well, I-”

Almost immediately, Will felt his body crumble to dust beneath him, the remnants of his reply dissolving in the sensation of his eyelids spasming over his pupils. Easily, unstoppable, like the continuous rushing of a waterfall or the speed of a bullet unrestrained, his senses collided, his sight melding with his hearing in a way that was impossible to describe and his balance fading in favor of a wave of agony that froze his blood and dragged electric knives down every muscle that twitched in his torso. It seized his mouth, intercepting the graceless plea for help he tried to shout, and suddenly, he knew that the intuitive feeling of discomfort was one he should have listened to long ago.

“Are you alright? Do you feel feverish?” They were echoed words despite the fullness of the room, his accent peaking through every vowel that slid past his teeth and bouncing off of the caverns of Will’s eardrums. “Or do you feel worse- as if your drink has been poisoned?”

The champagne. Will’s emptied glass slipped out of his hands and onto some wet surface with a squish, but he couldn’t yet create the will to look down at what it was. He imagined it was his own dead body lying there, but reminded himself it was only because the insect poison had begun in its causing him to see a bit too much and much too little simultaneously.

“How did-” Will broke his sentence in favor of gulping a metallic liquid back down his throat, sticky drops of sweat gliding down his face and staining his collar as he struggled to stay awake. “How did you-”

“You are clumsily obvious, Sir Graham.”

His vision doubled as he stumbled onto one of the sculpted columns, his heartbeat thumping in irregular intervals as his knees knocked against each other and his chest heaved with malignant affliction. When had he switched the drinks? Was he going to die?

“If you hold concern of whether or not you’ll survive through the night, take solace in the fact that the dose has been diluted. You can thank the potted plant to your left, for that.”

“What?” Will smacked his palm on the side of the column, feeling razor blades begin to burst about in his chest, and turned to squint at the potted fir sapling that had been meticulously

placed by his side long before the celebration began, his empty champagne flute having fallen into damp soil. “*Oh*.”

Hannibal saw the opportunity to step closer in the midst of Will’s distraction and took it, his two padded steps crossing the distance of the Red Sea as he leaned inches away from Will’s head. “You aren’t in any position to be by yourself, even still. Your chest is burning, your blood is churning, and to be frank, you need someone to care for you. It seems you’ve made that much a habit.”

“I-”

The feeble argument was overwhelmed by the blaring sound of music, court musicians blindly easing continuances of violent notes from their instruments. The premiering crescendo alone was enough to cause drops of blood to overflow from the creases of his lips, and Will prayed to a God he didn’t believe in to keep him coherent until the conversation was over.

“Ah, the musicians have at last begun to play the first waltz. A perfect opportunity, wouldn't you agree?” Hannibal smiled, one that made Will’s brain flinch, and filled the distance completely until one of his hands fell upon his shoulder and the other was held out in a sign of invitation.

“Shall we?”

In his own response, Will said nothing, but slumped his weight onto the Duke’s chest in a form of reluctant agreement. It was too late to care what people saw or thought, and despite the clusters of gasps he heard from guests, he allowed him to whisk his feet to the center of the ballroom and waltz with him until he grew bored and chose to throw his limp body away. In the moment, it was all he could think to do.

Hushed utterances bubbled about the ballroom like the cackles of hyenas as the music soared into its second crescendo, a waltz of some kind that would have been identifiable if Will's body wasn't dipped in the thick musk of Death, and continued all as his feet dragged along the center of the floor. He was lethargic, his body shaking despite the warmth of the room and his yellowed eyes fixed on an elaborately carved point in the ceiling, but none of it couldn't keep him from being cradled in between muscular arms and strewn about the marbled tile that lined the floor, nor could it stop Hannibal from looking down at him with a stare that could burn steel as he led the both of them into a dance of dubious passion.

“You are smarter than you look, Sir Graham.”

He whispered the words in his ear like song notes as the two glided across the ballroom, his breath smelling of untampered champagne as they swayed idly to the melodic sounds of double basses and violas. Somehow, like a gift from an angel, Will found a before lost will to reply as he opened a gap in between his lips.

“And you... are a *demon*.”

Hannibal did little more than smirk at that, taking a painfully slow time in inching his hand down the back of his partner's embroidered waistcoat with one hand and squeezing Will's wet palm with the other.

"A wonderful combination we would be, don't you think?"

It was the last thing Will could remember before he slumped into sleep, falling limp in Hannibal's embrace with the torpor of a tattered ragdoll and finding an ironic comfort in his warmth until he allowed himself to be dragged away by concerned hands he had felt before and yet never wanted to feel again.

All while he stay there, half-dead and half-tortured by that disguised devil, hallucinations of past selves and dead relatives all had been touching him, *fondling* him, shoving him into the arms of his enemy and leaving his seizing body to shiver in his clutches with smiles that reached the circles under their eyes and limbs that broke and contorted to better fit in the crowd they had formed around the two men. In the moment, long and excruciating, it was hell- but later, Will would find it to be a twisted sort of blessing from Fate.

Because just before he finally faded into unconsciousness, he was given the opportunity to dance with his Angel of Death.

Chapter End Notes

Istg I crawl outta the trenches to post these updates sometimes but we back! Hopefully you enjoy :D
also, lol, can you tell I was into the Borgias when I wrote this chapter? (Really good show)

no. 3- Nocturne

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"I'm not leaving yet, John. He's been squirming about in that bed for the past 2 hours. He's to wake up soon, I know he is."

A long, mumbled response, and the shifting of a posture just outside the doorway. The sun hadn't yet rose, but yet the two men were awake and energetic just outside of the door.

"Enough. You've said your point. Just- Just let me know when he wakes. I'll tell him about it myself."

◇

It wasn't until 29 hours had passed and Will had been escorted back to the Graham manor that his eyelids twitched back open, dressed again in his ivory colored nightclothes and tucked into his bed like a child before a holiday. His mind was clouded, thoughts drifting from left to right in the caverns of his skull and falling nowhere, and yet still didn't prevent him from realizing the truth of his situation. He had failed to execute Hannibal, and now both he and Jack's lives dangled from a red string that could be cut at any uncertain time or date.

He had little else to feel or to think of as he laid in that room aside from his own demise, but wondered if his life at that moment were to be considered one of virtue and justness; a righteous but warped tale where good triumphed over evil and heroes relished themselves with the last laugh in the story of their own demise. If that was so, and Will was truly nothing more than a villain to be slaughtered, he would be left to only question what type of uncouth God would allow a murderer to live like a king and a victim to become a casualty.

Because that was all Will viewed himself as. A victim and a future casualty.

Jack was nowhere in sight, which was a fact that made him feel both relieved of the present and dreadful of the future, but he smiled still at the sight of his handmaid busying herself with flower arrangements by his windowsill as if nothing had changed since his 'outing'. Ironic, considering that she had been the only servant in the manor to know what the outing truly had entailed.

“Hello, Ms. Beverly.”

"How are you feeling, Will?"

He didn't have time to answer the question before Beverly took off to inform one of the guards outside of the room of Will's newfound consciousness. In the meantime, he squarely sat up from the mattress and let the comforters slump around his waist, rubbing his face with his palm and scowling at the sensation of dried blood that grazed his fingertips. There was an iron bucket to his right, emptied then but still tinted with brown stains along the bottom and

sides of it, and he surmised that he had been vomiting his own stomach lining in his sleep. Delightful.

“Do you think you can retain this?” Beverly shuffled back into his bedroom and lifted a cup of tea in the air, a wordless offer Will accepted with the nodding of his head as he watched her shut the door closed.

“I’d rather appreciate it if you told me what happened last night, as well.” He squinted at the two pills on the saucer, then returned wary eyes to her.

“They’re iron pills, courtesy of Doctor Gideon. He prescribed them to you the night you came in- the night before last.” She clarified the date for him, and Will stifled a groan at the time that had passed. “And onto your other point, what makes you think I’d know about what happened that night?”

“You’re nosey.”

“I’m not nosey, Sir.” Beverly set the saucer in his hands and waited to see if he’d be able to hold it, leaning her side against one of the foot posts that framed his bed. “Information’s simply drawn to me.”

“Drawn to you? That’s a laugh.”

The way the two conversed could have been considered too crass for a handmaid to speak with a noble, just as it could have been considered impolite for a noble to engage in sardonic banter with a handmaid, but Will couldn’t bring himself to care. He never could in the 6 years they had known each other. His handmaid was a friend, an only friend, and the one reason why he hadn’t ran from that nightmarish manor already.

“They're... saying you made a mixup. That it’s your fault the plan went wrong, and that Jack was the one who ‘resolved the incident’.” Slightly contorting her face and lowering her voice as if revealing a secret, Beverly’s expression alone was an indication that telling Will what she heard was the last thing she had intended to do that day. It didn't matter.

“Of course they are.” Despite the flatness of the statement, he felt twinges of an unnecessary guilt inflate in his lungs.

Beverly shifted in her spot, standing against the foot post. “There was also...a letter.”

“From Lady Margaret?” He swallowed the iron pills as he waited on her answer.

“From the Duke. Sent personally.”

The tea cup clanked against its saucer, held by wobbling fingers.

“And… what did the letter say, Beverly?”

“I couldn’t read it. The only one who knows what it says, aside from your father, is Jack.” She was exasperated, ironically pacing the floor in the stead of her overseer and letting the creaks serve as temporary distractions for Will’s reeling emotions.

“What really happened that night, Will?”

It was a question he was expecting, but not one he was willing to fully answer. He hadn’t wanted to relive the experience. It was too fresh; the feeling of Hannibal’s hand pressed against the small of his back, the tapping of dress shoes whose reverberation outmatched even the loudest of cellos, the sensation of soft lips curling against the side of his neck as accented murmurs caressed his eardrums, the hallucination of his dead mother beside him with a smile on her face that clashed with the harrowing sight of her sunken eyes and swollen hands.

He could never be able to enclose that night with words, to describe it in a way that would have allowed Beverly to relish in the taste of that tainted drink and cause her to feel a heat race all throughout her bones when she heard how strong he was and how passionately he held him. No sentence, no language of any design could convey that emotion, the one that had replaced Will’s veins with its roots and bore it’s poisonous fruit in his heart; and so he decided it was best to not even attempt it at all. Instead, all he could do was give her the vaguest of truths, the ones that stated Hannibal had swapped their drinks and waltzed with him before he fell victim to his own inadequate execution, and even then he was interrupted by the brassy throat clearing of the one man he hadn't wanted to see before he could even finish his vocal recollection.

“Miss Katz.” Jack Crawford’s voice rang out clearly, sounding louder in the room than it usually did as he kept his stare on Will’s sweating face. “I presume you know what it is I need you to do?”

Will could see Beverly’s vertebrae dance in her spine at the sound of Jack’s command, registering that her presence was no longer required and bounding step after step towards the carved bedroom door. “Of course, Sir Crawford.”

In times like those and moods like that, stagnant and stale, no one preferred to oppose Jack’s demands. In a selfish, sordid sort of fashion, Will wished they did.

The door slammed closed, and with it, the thought of a genial conversation, and Jack took his seat at Will’s desk and leaned hunched over with his hands clasped between opened knees. He sat directly in front of him, but his position didn’t matter. Will could have felt those eyes from any direction and from any location without needing to push himself an inch.

“You failed, Will.”

“I almost died, Jack.”

His play at sympathy went purposely ignored in spite of its merit, and Jack’s jaw clenched with the impatience of a man who was eager to start an argument. It wouldn’t happen.

“I told you not to get overwhelmed. I told you to keep your wits about you. For the love of the Virgin, WIll, I told you how crucial it was that you get this right.” He seethed his statements despite his best attempts to sound relaxed.

“You can make your point without needless Catholic conjecture, Sir Crawford.”

Jack moved to stand, and Will flinched on his mattress until his back pressed lightly against his satin pillows. With his shoulders squeezed and his chest hunched inward, he set his now empty cup down on the surface of one of his nightstands and lowered his eyes in a belated show of respect.

“I thought you could handle it. I knew you could handle it." Jack’s voice was softer now, low and rumbling and passionately hated, but he continued on. "What happened to the plan?"

"He switched the drinks." It was the short answer, the proper one. Will knew he had heard an inkling of his past conversation with Beverly, and found no necessity in repeating memories he wished would be repressed.

"He switched the drinks." Jack repeated, reclining in Wills seat and letting the temporary quiet serve as a reflection of his opinions on the matter. If the mood of the room served as an indication, those opinions were far from good. “And why did he switch the drinks, Will?”

“Because he knew I poisoned his glass.”

“And instead of having you detained immediately, or killing you in the ways we theorize he has before, he instead made you drink his champagne?” Jack pushed further, never moving but still too close to Will’s face.

“Yes.”

“And why would he do that?”

With that, Will was caught in a lie he hadn’t told. He didn’t have an answer, nor the beginnings of an answer, that would satisfy the situation at hand or solidify the matter he argued for, and he burned at the acknowledgment of it. Hannibal hadn’t had a reason to dilute the drink, to save him from his own demise and yet sign his name on Death’s contract simultaneously, but he did. He did, and he knew he could; because he knew he could get away with it.

However, theories like that never fared well without evidence, at least not when Will was concerned, and Will didn’t have even the bottle of poison to show for what had happened that night. All he had were ideas, old ones that he wanted to disappear, new ones that made his body ache and one that could only question the motives of the demon he waltzed with.

“Why would he give you the glass, Will? Why would he seek to keep you alive, instead of obtain your reasoning for wanting to assassinate him or kill you where you stood?” Jack leaned into the chair as if he won a battle, watching Will tremble even despite the warm September air that broke out through cracks in his windows.

“Because he hadn’t wanted to kill me.” Will grasped the bedsheets beside him and crumpled the excess fabric into balled fists. “He wanted to toy with me.”

“He-He distracted me, had me dance with him until I passed out, and then engaged me in frivolous conversation just to *taunt* me. To see how I’d react.”

Jack didn’t seem convinced, in the same way no sane man would have when confronted with such bogus conjecture, but said nothing. There was another pregnant pause, one that nearly made the bloodstained bile reemerge in Will’s chest, and after a number of seconds passed for much longer than needed, Jack shuffled in his inseam pocket to grab what Will knew would only make the current encounter that much worse. “So I suppose this is his way of taunting you as well, then.”

He threw a torn open envelope down at Will’s feet, the beginnings of it’s contents spilling onto his calves, and his body bobbed at the feeling of the impact. It wasn’t heavy, nor uncomfortable, but the feeling of it made him wince nonetheless; and he stared down at it as if it had disgraced him publicly.

“Depends on what it is.” Will took hold of it, easing three dense pages from their confines and attempting to piece together the gaps of a broken and broken again wax seal on the back of the envelope. Whoever first read the letter cracked the seal out of anxiety, a nervous tic stemming from things the person didn’t want to see and even less wanted to accept, and the smell of imported ink slapped through the pages.

“Read.”

When the pages were skimmed through and the dust of confusion had settled, Will wished he hadn’t read any of it.

It was a letter, yes, and yet more than that. It was an invitation, a cordial one beset by clean handwriting and velveted compliments that the sender nor reader were swayed by, and held the weight of Will’s next breaths in its hands like an inanimate Atlas. With clear cursive letters and pounding words, there laid a request to attend lunch with Hannibal himself- a request Will vehemently intended to decline before realizing that again, he had no say in the matter.

“Jack, no.” The protest was useless. Will knowingly persisted. “This isn’t based in good intentions. Whatever that man wants from me, why he wants to see me, none of what he’s doing is *good.*”

He despised the desperation that was steadily poured into his sentences, making them stumble in the air like flightless birds and fall dead in between the two of them. “Don’t you believe me?”

“I believe that you failed in your execution, Will- and that this luncheon is nothing but a reflection of Hannibal’s worry for your wellbeing and feigned welcomeness of your company; a gesture to convince the public that he's not the monster he truly is.” Jack's face was empty, stagnant; staring at Will and leaving a chill in his bones. "That's what I believe. The facts."

Did he really believe in the facts, or was it simply a refusal to believe that for once, Will’s failures hadn’t been his fault? Even in their own relationship, apparently, Will was seen only as a fool; a strange form of idiot-savant that clung to his intelligence so to uselessly disguise his perpetual social idiocy, and the fact seemed to present itself more transparently than ever now that Jack’s words had been said and meant. He tried not to let it affect him. It did.

“A murderer feels no worry for his victim.” Will chose to let the other discussion end abruptly as he switched the subject, the feeling of it equivalent to hearing steel gates close and clank locked, and spoke with a dullness he selfishly hoped Jack would notice. He didn’t.

“Then its either a show of worry, or you were never to be his victim in the beginning.”

Now was the time Jack chose to look at him again, running thick fingers through thinning hair and waiting for Will to reply in the way he already knew he would.

“So what, you and *him* are sending me there to try again? To perhaps use arsenic this time around?”

“No.” It was an offended word, dripping with the need to sound like it was derived from a place of familial affection. “No, no. We’re thinking of something else, something foolproof. The acceptance of this meeting with him is simply to erase any suspicion he may have gathered after hearing of your 'sudden illness'.”

Jack could have saved his breath if he had been more concise. Will was to be damage control, sent to repair the mess he had made in a pressured apology from Jack and his Father. After all, everything he did, everything he said, and everywhere he went was all pressured.

“What will it take for you and him to finally stop controlling my life, Jack?” He felt like a child again, his shirt feeling bigger on him than it was before all while he brought his gaze to the window and counted sparrows in a flying flock. “Or did I already miss that chance when I let Hannibal live?”

“You’re unstable, Will. We- *I* only want to protect you.”

“From what?”

“From yourself.”

Will held his hands together and continued to peer out of the window, choosing not to respond to Jack’s answer, and remained still as the man stood from his seat and made way for the door.

“Goodbye, William.”

It was the last thing he heard until the door closed, and after it, Will was all too suddenly left to rot in the sensation of his own silence as he stared at the invitation once again and dreaded tomorrow.

Chapter End Notes

Shh- dont tell anyone i uploaded this, im supposed to be on break right now lmao

no.4- Maniere

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“William, look away.”

Jack pressed a hand to Will’s eyes in a belated movement, one that tried to erase the sights already there and prevent the little boy from seeing any others, but it was too late. Jack hadn’t realized it, his father hadn’t realized it, nor had anyone else, but Will did.

And he figured that she did too, for as he slipped from his Jack’s grasp and stole a few more minutes to see his mother dangling in the air with her silk stockings tied around her throat and her body swaying to the pulsating breaths of August, he could see peeks of a smile sealed on her face before her mouth popped open and her tongue dangled from her lips. There, among swaying roses and behind thin glass walls, he could hear her makeshift noose strain under the weight of her body; and for the first time in years, he could hear her will to live ring clearly through the deathly action she had taken.

Then, he found himself spellbound by the beauty in his mother as she hung there, how blue her bursted veins looked against the radiant glow of the moon and how her frail little body swung like leaves on trees, finally unbound by her husband’s shackles and her own mental prisons. He adored how cool and dense her feet were when he slinked under Jack's wing to run his fingers along the tops of them, how her eyes bulged out of their sockets as if eager to see the grass below her, how contented she seemed to be as her tattered and mangled shell hovered over her favorite flowers. He wanted to keep her there forever, until his mother’s body transformed into an ugly corpse, and admire the scene she had created for him until he could no longer.

But time moved on, and before he could speak, her dead body was strung off of the ceiling of the greenroom like a parasite in an animal; and now ten years later, all Will wanted to do was hang in that very spot and smile the same way she had until his own breaths were stolen by thick hemp rope. He figured anyone would when forced to dine with a man who was both a theorized killer and had tried to poison him only days ago.

He had gone to his father in efforts to deter his leery fate, of course, if not for any other reason than because he greatly enjoyed causing his own suffering, and received the very same answer he had from Jack earlier that day. A 'No'; followed by a needless slew of sincere insults that shamelessly slapped Will in the face, each one worse than the last, and an offhanded comment regarding his ineptness that left Will more mortally wounded than any switched poison could in his life.

So then there in that greenhouse was where he sat, and there he had been for what was now over half of the next day; sitting on the bench that stood inches from an eerily nostalgic flowerbed, thinking of how elated his mother must have been when she felt her windpipe burst in her neck, and wondering if he would ever be able to replicate that feeling of pure bliss.

“Your elusiveness is a trait I like least about you, Sir Graham.” A familiarly shrill voice buzzed from his left, accompanied by bouncing skips and shuffling fabric, and brought a temporary silence to the thoughts of his fantastical self-extermination.

“But you still always seem to find me, don’t you Lady Margaret?” The question was rhetorical, the answer known by both of them, and floated listlessly in the sky as Molly sat beside him.

“I wouldn't be here if I didn't.” She joked. As usual, she didn't explain why she was there, or how she had found him. Whenever Molly wanted to see him, she simply saw him; and Will had learned many years ago that he would have no choice but to get accustomed to her surprise visits. Thankfully, her company was enjoyed.

“I heard of your sudden illness. Did Doctor Gideon provide you with the diagnosis?”

“Encephalitis.”

“That sounds dreadful.”

It would have been, if it were the truth.

“You needn’t worry. I’m fine, now." Shuffling in his pants pocket, Will grabbed a small tin box of pills, shaking them gently in their container before putting them away again. "Besides, he also provided me a few iron pills to take whenever I felt lightheaded- though I’m sure that's not information you were looking for.”

“I just want to know that you’re feeling better, Will.” Molly assured him. “Any information that assures me of that is information I'm looking for."

He had forgotten how blunt she tended to be regarding her love for him. It was one of the best traits about her, in Will’s own opinion; always, her intentions bubbled from within her like water from the fountain of youth. Not akin to his own emotions in the slightest.

“One of the handmaids told me about your argument with your father.”

“I don’t have arguments with him, Molly. To argue implies there is an equal exchange in the conversation.” Will had an edge to his voice that he hadn’t meant to place, and reclined further backwards on the bench.

"There wasn't?"

"He told me I was a mistake. That I ruin everything I touch." He held himself in favor of rocking all too slightly in his seat, smooth elbows clenched in slender hands. "Do you think I could find the strength to respond to such claims?"

“No. No, I… I don’t.”

“Oh, I can’t begin to know how hard it is for you, Will.” Molly reached for Will’s veined hand, tentatively at first, but bolder when she noticed him keep himself from recoiling away from her. “For you to see these things, to live like this.”

“And, if it’s to be kept solely in the memory of this conversation, I dare say I despise your father more than you could ever for his putting you through the things he does.”

“You’ve hardly met my father, Molly.” Will mused, his left fingers brushing over hers in an inconspicuous manner of appreciation he knew she would notice. “Even despite the time in which we've known each other, isn’t that a bit presumptuous?”

“Perhaps,” Molly seemed relatively unconcerned regarding his question when met with his calloused fingerprints waving left and right on her knuckles, the notion of her opinions being ‘presumptuous’ so far out of her range of sight it caved in on itself on the other side of the world. “But I can guarantee that any man who would dare make you feel this way is a man I’d kill without a second thought.”

“You’re quite vulgar, you know that?” She had a habit of enjoying the grotesque, one Will could never understand and yet still sympathized with, that had been fostered and developed over years of faux investigation and familial connection to the previous Police General. Her father, Will believed was the relation. Perhaps her cousin; his memory failed him in times like these.

"Do you dislike it?"

"I could never dislike it."

He looked at her and gave a thin-lipped smile, strained but genuine.

"I find it admirable, Molly. I always have."

“Then, that may very well be why we fare so well together. Why we could fare even better together, if-” Her words escaped her before she could temper them, her face flashing with emotions Will found best not to decipher. “-never mind. Hypothetical situations are rarely important.”

The coming autumn breeze sang around them, it’s wispy tendrils passing Molly’s hair about her neck and revealing large patches of pinkish birthmarks Will fought not to trail his hands over as he stared intently at her profile. He didn’t appreciate the silence.

“I’m sorry I don’t write to you more often. That I didn’t before everything *else* , either.”

They were true words, a previously lost honesty resurfacing just to ease the tired look of those eyes that kept their focus on purple tulips, and were accompanied by a movement that placed him inches closer to her all while keeping a careful distance that spanned the width of the Red Sea.

“Well then, I’m sorry as well. For being overbearing.”

“You never have to apologize to me, Molly. Not for acting within your own nature.”

“You mean it’s in my nature to be overbearing?”

Will moved to correct himself, taking her comment seriously, but stopped when he heard a suppressed laughter spill through Molly's fake coughs into her hand.

"Well no, but I wouldn't deny it if someone else dared to say it." His response was testing, but light.

"Oh really?" Molly leaned back to her original position, her head turning towards the scenery. "But in all honesty, Will, you don't have to apologize to me, either. You are you, the noble I've known and the man I've adored for years on end. Until the end of days, or until you finally reciprocate my affections, I will wait for as long as it takes for you to be comfortable in conversing with me."

"...If I weren't so crazed, I'd have wed you already."

"If you weren't so crazed, you'd be more annoying than interesting." Molly replied, watching Will's hand return to its partner but remaining unaffected. She was too preoccupied in looking at him, staring at the side of his face just as he had moments earlier and waiting to see if he would ever look at her again that afternoon.

"You find me interesting?" He fulfilled her wish, staring into her eyes one last time before letting his gaze fall onto a particularly brown freckle on the bridge of her nose.

"I find you annoying *and* interesting." The wind blew again and shifted down their backs like a breeze to a sail, causing Molly to stand and needlessly pat down the front of her dress before interlocking her fingers in a telling gesture. "Simultaneously."

He didn't devise a retort, didn't feel he needed one while surrounded by such foreign comfort, and stood up after her to escort her out of the Manor and back to her carriage. Her son, a fellow William, was apparently a stickler for timely returns given that Molly was his only living parent, and she adhered to their schedule intently so to not worry the child any more than he usually did. It was a hilarity, seeing that Willy was only a boy of four years old, but Will could find nothing wrong with their relationship. In fact, he envied it. It had been many, many years since there was ever someone who earnestly wanted him around them, or someone who he wanted to return to whenever they parted for too long. Molly came close, but the separation Will had built between them prevented her from getting any closer.

"Goodbye, Sir William." His name danced in the air and floated on her lofty intonations, a breath of spring in the field of yellowing greens he was surrounded by.

"Goodbye, Lady Margaret." He watched her climb into her carriage, too stubborn to enlist the aid of her stablehand but just limber enough to maneuver her underskirt into the seat and close the door behind her with a classlessness he was spellbound by.

"Ah, But before you go-"

She raised a brow, tapping on the partition that divided the halves of her carriage to postpone her departure and leaning her head to the window. He didn't get any closer at the sight of it, only raising his voice from the side of the gate, and rocked back and forth on the balls of his feet like a woman waiting for a kiss goodnight.

“Expect a letter from me. Sometime soon.”

“William, that may very well be the greatest declaration I’ve ever heard in my life.”

The hyperbolic sentiment was just as exaggerated and theatrical as a frivolous King’s self portraiture, but he found his ears burning at the sound of it even still as he kicked a stray rock centimeters away and waved her off, watching her carriage disappear against the wooded path and remaining still there until the air had turned cold and her scent had faded from his senses completely.

Molly’s presence provided a fleeting respite in the tumultuous turns of the day, more spirited than the fiercest drink and paired with an imperfectly gap-toothed smile to warm the world in place of his own, but even she couldn’t erase the letter that oozed disquiet on the surface of his desk. Walking into his bedroom and feeling the burning acid of danger that radiated off of the blackened ink, Will realized that nothing could.

Because when Sir Hannibal Lecter wanted something, he got it.

And now, he wanted *him* .

Chapter End Notes

pretty fluffy chapter tbh- forgot i wrote it lmaoooo
this was NOT beta read in the slightest, as I am knee deep in rl work rn and don't have time to do it myself, but I hope its still fine

no. 5- Bacarolle

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Presenting the guest d'honneur, as per your request."

Will walked through the doors at the sound of his cue, the uneasiness never quite fading away, and stood once again in front of the man from that nightmarish evening.

After Molly left the evening prior, Will had wasted no more time aiming to evade his future. In the early mornings, alone he had arrived at last to the chateau for the arranged luncheon, and now as he stood in the parlor doorway, no guards were needed to announce to Will the man he stood in front of.

It was Hannibal, again in Will's sight all too soon with a thin-lipped smile stretched from cheek to cheek and an air about him that smelt of deaths forgotten and murders remembered. And now across from him stood his disgusted guest yet again, head held low with eyes fixed up; reminiscent fantasies of idyllic murder methods sprouting their ways back into his vision like mushrooms on a fermented corpse.

"Sir Graham."

"Your Grace."

The titles were an insubstantial formality, as many greetings such as these were, but Will still couldn't get Hannibal's pronunciation of his name out of his ears once it had been said even after hearing it over and over again only a week ago. He figured that he'd never be able to.

"Please, let us sit." The Duke gestured to the table, making Will take notice of the cleverly placed irises and decorative cornucopias that sat between two covered plates of food, and then let his arm fall again to his side as he turned back in his guest's direction. "I've ensured the room to be ours alone for the duration of our meeting."

At the mention of it, the guards took their leave, closing the double doors behind them with a slam that shook the world.

"You were looking *forward* to this?"

"Of course I was. I invited you." Hannibal took a step to nowhere, and Will retreated in a similar fashion. He immediately despised the smile that curled in the corner of Hannibal's mouth when he noticed the ever-present distance remain between the two of them, but tried hard to let it go. He didn't know what would happen if he ever let that man get too close, and didn't intend to find out. *Everything horrible was always based in good intentions.*

"You only invited me because you have nothing better to do, it seems."

"Don't be facetious, Sir Graham. I always have better things to do." The duke backed away and sat in his seat, his black coattails curling to his thighs as he smoothed them down and adjusted in his chair. Will remained standing in the center of a floor tile, a position that made him feel like a chess piece. "I just chose to postpone them all in favor of meeting you again. Now, sit."

If Will tried hard enough, squinted his eyes and honed his focus, he could see the veins in Hannibal's neck bend and flex under his skin as he moved to sit down across from him on the other side of wooden dining table; and for a fleeting moment, Will wondered what that throat would have looked like if the poisoning had worked to begin with. Once he realized what that thought implied, he made sure to wipe it clean from his mind, and slumped onto the seat cushion with a purposeful 'oomph'.

"Why am I here, Hannibal?"

Hannibal noticed the withdrawn usage of titles, a notice made apparent by the pretentious raising of an eyebrow. "Are we comfortable enough to refer to each other by name, Sir Graham?"

"I simply don't believe I can refer to a person as 'graceful' when they've poisoned me. Not currently, at the very least."

From that came a low rumble of acknowledgement in Hannibal's throat, the man's Adam's apple bobbing against his skin before he continued in his preparation to eat his meal, and took to answering Will's original question.

"You're here because I called for you. Because I wanted you."

It was one thing to know it, but a completely separate one to hear it, spoken through soft lips with a callous tone of simplicity and landing flat in the middle of the dinner table; there in the space directly next to where Will's bleeding heart lay beating like another eccentric centerpiece.

"At that soiree, that night," Hannibal began, with his maroon eyes fixed on his target and the world frozen outside of the parlor window, "you had no reason to kill me, no reason to poison me or and no reason to disguise your ill intent, but you did. I find that to be a subject of great amusement as of late."

"I would hardly call wanting to end the plights of a murderer 'a subject of great amusement'."

"A murderer." Hannibal swirled red wine in his glass, the liquid floating around in an endless whirlpool and releasing subtle scents of apple and citrus. "I would hardly call myself a murderer."

"I would be lying if I told you I care about what you'd call yourself. The witnesses say enough."

Will couldn't begin to know if Jack had any witnesses, or if any witnesses even existed in this manner, but it was a bluff that worked nonetheless; and Hannibal reclined in his seat with his legs crossing under the table and his large hand gripping the end of the stem in between his fingers. He was amused, again. Will had amused him.

“So that’s all it takes to instill a desire to assassinate me within you, Will? Unreliable eyewitnesses and unfortunate murders that have no viable connection?” Hannibal murmured, soon setting his glass back down on the tabletop and leaning back towards his plate. “That hardly sounds like sufficient evidence.”

“Evidence is of little importance when the matter at hand is dealing with people like you.”

“And why is that?”

“Because you’re expendable.” Another empty statement, another show of strength that didn't exist and never had existed.

“If that’s true, then we’re more similar than I previously thought.” Hannibal reached for one of his knives and traced the blade along a side of the steak, revealing a pinkish center that oozed translucent juices all as a slender piece was cut and stabbed through with the sharpened prongs of a fork. If Will wasn’t still so stubborn, still so convinced that Hannibal was a man who would have been all too glad to poison him twice, he might have indulged in his own meal. But he didn’t, refused to, and so he only spent his time staring imaginary holes into Hannibal’s eyes with a grit jaw and hands gripping black satin slacks.

“Are you not hungry?”

“I often choose not to break bread with men who treat the topic of murder as a trivial conversation subject.”

“Delightful.”

There was a second, palpable quiet, one only interrupted by the occasional scratching of serrated blade on porcelain dining ware and the soft chewing of tender meat, and lasted just until Hannibal chose to speak again.

“You’re a man who doesn’t have much to lose, Sir Graham.” Hannibal wiped his mouth with his napkin in one smooth motion, setting the cloth back down when he was finished and tilting his head inquisitively to one side; like looking back at Will was as inconvenient as peering into darkness. “Though I’m sure I don’t have to tell you that.”

“A dying social status, a failing reputation, a broken family and an attempted murder weighing on your consciousness? From what I could gather, not many people consider your future to be shining particularly bright; figuratively or financially.”

Will swallowed, standing up from his seat and slamming his hands on either side of his untouched dish. “If this meeting is to consist solely of you spewing derivative insults in my direction, I see no reason for me to stay here.”

Hannibal remained motionless, the lack of reaction simultaneously so loud it could have been screaming at him.

“Sit.”

That was the only incentive he needed. Will sat back down before he could feel himself bend, and seemed to then instantly despise the truthful notion of him having obeyed the demands of a murderer solely due to emotions he could not control. His fear was the size of a mustard seed, and yet still larger than the faith he had in the hope that he could leave this meeting unscathed without adhering to Hannibal’s every beck and call.

“Get to your point, Hannibal.”

“How bad do you want to kill me, Sir Graham?" Hannibal's curiosity was misplaced, his question neither ingenuine nor pure in purpose. "Is it enough to keep you awake at night? Enough to make your heart nearly burst in your ribcage whenever you hear the sound of my name? Enough to make your throat dry when you wake and your eyes water when you sleep?”

“Hypothetical situations are rarely important.” Molly’s words came in handy then, as Will’s mind was too jumbled to think of any response of his own.

“I would hardly describe this situation as hypothetical."

“Then what would you describe it as?” Will gestured around the table with a flair of recklessness neither of them fully enjoyed.“A dinner party?”

"I would describe it as achievable."

Will could think of no response, and slumped down in his seat with his heart racing and his hand reaching for the glass of water that sat what felt like miles away. He couldn’t admit he was dumbfounded to a man like Hannibal, couldn’t show it in his face or in his palpable delay of a statement. He needed an excuse for his silence.

He couldn't find one.

“You see, your puzzling nature is one that mystifies me." Hannibal explained, taking control of the conversation when he found that Will would be unable to. “There’s something I don’t know about those eyes that hold secrets revealed to no one, that mind that borders on the edge of depravity, those hands with limitless potential. If you wanted to kill me, earnestly, I would have no qualms with providing you with the opportunity- provided that you grant *me* something, in return.”

“Excuse me?” Will had to somehow refrain from accidentally drowning himself with the sip of water he took, a task made nearly impossible when confronted with words so perplexing they made his eardrums twist and turn above his jaw.

“Allow me to place this in terms you can more easily understand, Sir Graham.” His half-eaten meal was now long forgotten as Hannibal pushed the plate aside, setting his elbows on

the table and his chin on intertwined knuckles. “If you like, I’ll *give* you the chance to kill me- however you like, whenever you like. In exchange, you’ll inhabit this manor with me until you do- and work under me as my servant.”

“...You’ve gone *mad* .”

It was the only conclusion Will could bring himself to come to.

“That’s a sentiment I’m often told.” Hannibal chuckled, an unwelcome sound when placed alongside the suffocating tension that had condensed around the two of them. “But, I’m far from it. Truly, I only wish to find a man desperate enough to be solely content with the position I offer him- serving the master of this estate.”

“I’ll serve no one.”

“You'll serve *me*.” Hannibal cut his gaze to Will before returning it to his glass of wine, tracing lazy circles around the rim of it as he droled on and ignored the shock that had slivered down his guest's back. “That is, unless you’d rather wait for another year to pass, another soiree to unwillingly attend and another glass to poison.“

Will muttered a loose curse under his breath, hoping that the man didn't hear it and yet not completely caring if he did, and gnawed at the loose skin on his bottom lip. “So in exchange for my opportunity to kill you, you’ll be entitled to having yet another servant under your constant supervision.”

It was a statement, not a question that Will wanted to ask nor wanted an answer to, but Hannibal affirmed it anyway with a slow nod that Will would find himself dreaming of long after the day was done. “Why? Why do you want to do this?”

"My work is never done. As a duke, I could use the assistance.” Hannibal set his hands again in his lap, looking to the painted ceiling and scanning the sky for his next sentence. “And, as for why I've chosen you in particular,"

“Well, I only want to see what will happen.”

Repulsion wasn’t something Will felt often, as he considered it to be a hypocritical emotion, but now, he paid close attention to how it festered inside of him and stabbed into his nerves with a throbbing virulence. Was this the only choice he had to prove to his father that he was worth a damn, or to Jack that he was more than the crazed child with a broken home? And would killing Hannibal truly be worth forsaking his privacy, his identity, his self?

His blood had run cold, had been that way for hours, and he could feel the slushed hemoglobin shift throughout his body with each second and each millisecond that passed. Will was regarded as a victim of circumstance in this world by both Hannibal and himself, cursed by God and man alike to dance eternally from the strings of premeditated fate that grit and ground against the pulsating veins in his wrists, and feet away from him sat the knife he would inevitably need to free himself from the string-like shadows of his own solemn life sentence.

It was all so terrifying, yet so dubiously tranquil, and brought forth the feeling of a lone raft drifting towards a coming tsunami. If blessed, Will could potentially ride the waves. Will had never been blessed.

“What’s your answer, Will? Or will you keep me in suspense indefinitely?”

“My answer should be obvious.” And it was; too obvious, considering the corner he had backed himself into and the dwindling pride that seemed to be running faster and faster out of his fingertips the more they sat there.

“Where in this mansion will I be staying, specifically? And how, pray tell, will I help you in your duties?”

Chapter End Notes

Me at the beginning of this series: "I have to write this series out to classical music in order for me to get in the ✨mood✨."
Me now, writing the climax of the story: *plays friday night funkin' theme on loop*
On a more serious note, apologies for the hiatus. (College is a bitch, what can i say.)
We're back to our semi-regular upload time, with 2 chap uploads this week to make up for the missing one last week.

no. 6- Gartenlaube

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

A cliff.

It was the only place Will had dreamt of for the past three days, quite an asinine setting for his subconscious mind to be stuck on and yet always enchanting whenever he found himself at its precipice. Tonight marked the fourth night of standing on that cliff, an anniversary of sorts that Will would find no peace in celebrating, and he took a breath as he let himself fall into the suspension of disbelief that came so easily in dreams like these.

He could feel the wind blow about his face, salty air nipping at his five o'clock shadow and stinging his cheeks with a relentlessness similar to a child with a grudge, and wriggled his bare toes against the jagged edges to fruitlessly attempt to shake a strange attraction to the phantasmic fantasies of discomfort that had settled on the arches of his feet.

Will wasn't a metaphorical thinker, creative nor innovative, but still had the common sense to see just what this cliff was to represent in his recurring dream; how it symbolized the life he was forced to live when the world became real and dreams faded into memories Will wouldn't remember by the time his feet touched hardwood. After all, contrary to popular belief, Will was smart. He could figure out at least this part of his life; as even if his world was in shambles, his dreams came easy. Simple. Concrete. So here he stood, on the edge of his sanity, watching the stones of logic dip and dance off of jaded edges before splunging into icy waves whose depth had no limit. He stood there on his anxiety, on his antipathetic sympathy and sympathetic antipathy, with the fogs of disorientation swelling around his body and caressing stony curves through the confines of his clothes.

On that cliff, he felt himself take no breaths despite the rising and falling of his chest, too focused on preventing his premature fall from a clumsy grace he never had, and only swayed to the beats of timeless winds that crooned in his eardrums. After all, as long as he didn't move and just stood there, staring, he'd never have to feel the sensation of falling. He'd be safe. And all he wanted to be was safe.

In Will's mind, his superego was probably playing this scene in his subconsciousness to warn him of his own complacency, his id daring him to take a step and plunge without a thought of the consequences. But it was all useless, because his ego promised him the world if he just stood there and waited.

It was hell to wait, a treacherous, dangerous hell that Will never liked and a hell that caused him more heartache than serenity, but it was the only hell Will knew.

And so he would stay in that Hell.

And so he would wait.

With a face hidden amongst the billowy grey shadows of fog, red hands numb against the cold of breezes that only grew stronger with each cloud that blew by high above his tangled hair, ears that heard waves crash thousands of feet away, and glassy eyes that looked at everything without looking at anything, Will waited. And waited. And waited all until he woke up.

When his eyes popped open and his hands gripped cool bedsheets, it took a few beats of silence for Will to realize that he wasn't in his own room anymore, the Graham manor now existing as nothing but a faded memory in his schema. It took even longer for him to fully realize that he was now living in the chateau of a murderer, and would be living there indefinitely.

Once the younger man agreed to his grisly arrangement, Hannibal had wasted no time in assimilating Will into his home, sending the younger man away for one all too temporary day in favor of arranging an entire room and wing for him in the house all within fourteen hours. If anyone else had done such a thing for him, it would have been flattering, but *Hannibal Lecter* was the man who had done such; and that fact made the entire situation one that left Will with a brittle buzzing in his bones that he felt would never go away.

Jack had rushed to his side the moment Will returned to his father's manor that day before, in typical Jack fashion, asking what had gone on and why Will had looked so disheveled. When Will told him, or at least told him the aspects that were most important, Jack froze for a long moment and was speechless in the midst of his own processing of the situation; like Will's acceptance to living with Hannibal was leagues worse than his attempt to assassinate him. And when Will in turn asked him what was wrong, if anything was wrong, Jack didn't answer the question. He just left the room, and said he'd 'return soon'. But 'soon' came quickly, and Jack never honored his promise.

At the time, his sudden departure wasn't what left Will confused. What left Will confused was how he still allowed himself to feel disappointed at Jack's refusal to sit down with him and talk things out like a friend ordinarily would, despite knowing that Jack would never do so.

Still, time passed without care or regard as to what Will felt or how long he needed to process what he felt, and now here he sat one day later; on a bed that was larger and nicer than any other he had ever slept on, with clothes that could quite possibly have cost more than his entire life worth nestled tightly around his bony back, and in a room that sat a few thousand or so feet from the maniac he called his target.

His bedroom was fully furnished, much to a subdued surprise Will tried and failed to suppress when a guard showed him to the area, lavishly decorated with items so clearly extravagant it made Will himself grow concerned. Burgundy walls adorned by golden curtains and surrounding velveted furniture, a wardrobe filled with clothes manufactured by names and companies even the French Will himself couldn't pronounce; Hannibal took a remarkable meticulousness in making the room look nice. It didn't matter. Will hadn't come to the chateau for lodging, or for pampering. He came to prove a point, and to stop a monster from killing again in the best way he could.

The floors didn't creak when Will stood up on them, which was a change he appreciated; but were cold, and sent goosebumps onto his arms all as he walked from one corner of the room to the other and set a hand to the doorknob.

"Sir Graham?"

He didn't get a chance to open the bedroom door before it swung open for him.

A maid. A petite, questioning maid, not quite an adult but much too old to be considered a child, who had a blonde eyebrow hunched and an ashy hand on the doorknob. He stared at that hand for a short while, wondering if it had ever taken part in one of Hannibal's many murders, but thought better of it by the time his focus drifted back to her face. Her eyes didn't possess that sleek blackness that Hannibal's did, nor that malignant shine in them which proved that the only light in their lives was found in bloody bodies and arterial cuts that left rouge splatters on bedroom walls. They were just eyes, she was just a maid, and Will was just overthinking. But, Will was constantly overthinking, so that aspect came as no surprise to him.

"His Grace most ardently requests your presence in his office once you've tidied yourself up."

"Did he tell you to say all that?"

"No. I only figured that first impressions matter, is all."

"Well then, thank you."

The maid smiled through thin lips, chapped from the winds of early autumn and scabbed from a presumably bad but secretly shared habit of biting the loose skin that would stick up from them, and nodded.

It took an uncomfortably long amount of time for Will to finally realize that the girl would not leave that spot unless he had chosen to follow her, and so took a moment to change clothes; giving his own nod of courteous appreciation for her patience, and glanced at his bottle of iron pills before thinking better of taking them with him. No servant would have a reason to tamper with them.

He met her outside of his room a few minutes later with a compliant smile on his face. He hadn't wanted to offend her. If he played his cards right, she could be useful.

"Have you settled into the Chateau well enough? Living here is always frightenin' during the first few days." She said, leading him down marbled halls with her eyes on her shoes.

He looked at her and raised an eyebrow.

"That he *did* tell me to ask." She was quick to explain, bashfully wiping her hands on her apron.

"I'm getting along well enough." Will answered. "But tell him I despise every waking moment in it."

“That wouldn’t be the first time I heard an answer like that, if it provides any comfort to you. Few of the servants here have actually enjoyed their stay.” She gave a sympathetic nod. “It’s why they always come and go so fast.”

Will chucked, sarcastic and humorless. “You say that like they’re running away, or the like.”

“It’s a beautiful day out today, Sir Graham. Do enjoy it; the gardens are spectacular in autumn.”

She didn't confirm nor deny his assumption, which made him wary, but he didn't have time to press her on the subject before they had arrived at their destination.

“Presenting Sir Graham, Your Grace.”

Miss Madchen pushed open the door, seamless and elegant, all to reveal an office smelling of scents too fresh to linger in the home of a killer and housing Hannibal Lecter behind a sharp birch desk, seated in an office chair and reading slowly to the mellow sound of old leaves scraping against the back window.

“Sir Graham.” Hannibal closed his book, the pages well worn, curved upwards, and indicating that it was a favorite in the Duke’s collection. “I’m glad to see that Miss Madchen has done well in escorting you here.”

Will said nothing, as he could think of nothing to say, and gripped at his sleeves to keep him as centered as possible.

“Please, sit. I’d like to share a moment with you.” he shooed the maid away and simultaneously gestured for Will to come in.

“Don’t say that like we’re friends.”

“I never implied we were.”

It was terrifying, in hindsight, how that gleam in Hannibal’s eyes had a freezing cold behind them so intense it gave Will a metaphysical frostbite. He surmised that Hannibal would always have that gleam in his eyes, as it wasn’t the first time he had seen it and would most likely not be the last; and sat across from him with a slow step and even slower acceptance that sooner or later, he’d have to actually talk to the man in a way that meant more than off-handed sentences and dry retorts. His reluctance still couldn't stop the office foor from shutting behind him, though.

“Did you sleep well?”

“No.”

It was the only word he wanted to respond with, and was the truth. The echoes of the walls, the creaking of far away floorboards that seemed to groan tales of sinful wrongdoings every other second, and that damn cliff all played their fair part in ensuring that Will would spend his first night in the chateau with both eyes open and both hands clenching at his heart through his sweat-stained shirt.

“And why is that?” Hannibal looked up to him suddenly, pressing him on his answer in a way that felt deceivingly genuine. “What did you dream of, Will?”

“A lot of things.” Will started with a shrug, placing his intertwined fingers in between his thighs. “Water. Fog. A cliff. And myself, standing there. Watching the world pass by.”

“It seems like a very picturesque nightmare.” Hannibal murmured, a look of reflection on his face so thick it seeped into the atmosphere around them.

“Similar to how the world sees you?”

“Similar to how I see *you*.”

“I don't see how you could possibly view me that way." An involuntary scoff left Will’s lips, accompanied by a pompous eyeroll and the bitings of a cheek."Unlike you, I’m no murderer. I gain no pleasure in killing people for the sake of killing them, or housing others for my own sadistic little games.”

“But you are here to kill me, yes?”

“I’m here only out of necessity.” He didn’t mention the lingering doubt in his mind about the truth of Hannibal being a killer despite the man having done all but confirm it, nor did he mention the thoughts of how he could get out of this situation without having to try and kill him a second time. As if trying to read his mind, Hannibal shifted in his seat, and Will scooted further backwards in his own chair to ensure that the man didn’t catch him at a time when his defenses were down.

"And if it wasn't necessary? Would you be here then, too?"

Will took too long to reply, a rapping of the Duke's fingers on the desk stealing his turn in the conversation, and there was nothing for a time until Hannibal moved into the next phase of conversation.

"I've created a contract, for our future engagement." Hannibal took what Will saw to be an unhealthy amount of pride in himself as he showed Will the contract, a thick parcel of pages tied neatly at the corners with ribbon. "It will ensure things remain fair between us in the midst of our arrangement."

"How courteous of you."

"You are granted full autonomy and your own quarters in the main house, to help aid you in your future... endeavors, but in exchange, I expect you to behave as a servant would until you achieve your goal. From now until you've tasted my blood, you will adhere to my demands. And-"

He paused, staring at the contract and looking as if he were mulling over his words.

Will clenched his jaw, pursing his lips before releasing them just to force an inquisitive "And?" between his teeth.

"And every night, as also stated in the contract, you will join me for dinner."

"For what purpose?" Now, Will was testing him, slowly losing patience but still all too aware of his own powerlessness. "Servants do not normally dine with their employers, is all."

"You should know by now that this is far from a normal household." Hannibal's voice was low, leering as he leaned onto the desk and handed Will a pen to sign with. "And that I am far from a normal man."

He pointed to a line at the bottom of the contract, and Will wasted no time in signing it. He hadn't wanted to spend more time with the man than was necessary.

"I've taken the liberty of assigning Miss Madchen to escorting you about the chateau. Today, you will grow accustomed to the home. Tomorrow, you will receive your first batch of requests. And tonight, we will enjoy a second round of conversation." Each sentence was said with an empty look and emptier smile, and Hannibal motioned for Will to leave with the waving of his hand once his 'debriefing' was completed. It made him feel like a fool.

He knew that the Duke wouldn't care what he made him feel like.

"It was a pleasure, Will. I look forward to having you for dinner."

Even though Will walked calmly out of the room as the man gave his goodbyes, escorted down careening hallways by Miss Madchen and growing ever further from his Duke, he still couldn’t help but wince at the thought of the true meaning that could have been behind Hannibal’s final words.

Chapter End Notes

Time to say goodbye to the Graham Manor- and hello to the Hannibal Chateau!
Good news- we're about to delve into our first act of the story *cue dancing*! Shit gets pretty grizzly from here 😃
(In other news- love how i said I'd post this on friday but spent the day in the hospital instead)

no. 7- Dulcinea

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

A part of Will felt horrible, and yet the majority of him felt absolutely nothing.

For the three hours in which the maid had shown him about the Chateau- he had come to learn that her name was Georgia - Will hadn't been listening to almost anything she said. One moment, she'd be discussing something about a stablehand, and the next moment it would be about the perennial tulips she had planted along the western side of the greenhouse in her first year as a maid. He couldn't handle the weight that came fastened to her conversation, but then, he hadn't really tried to handle it either. Instead, he had been focused on *him;* the incomparable, irritating, insane owner of the chateau in which he too now stayed.

Hannibal Lecter was an undeniably talented man, intelligent and well-renowned across the streets of France for his incomparable charisma; and because of that, his life was carefully watched. In a cursed sort of contradiction, Will Graham himself was messy, *clumsy* , and so it would be impossible for his hands to successfully wrap around Hannibal's throat as the time stood then. He needed a plan, and yet could not think of one. He could only think of how much he missed home, missed his childhood, and longed for times years past when his body still sprang with newness and his thoughts were filled with ideas not yet tainted with the stench of pre-meditated murder.

"Sir Graham?"

Will gnawed on his thumbnail, still not entirely present in the conversation at hand. "Hm?"

"I was asking if you had a penchant for reading."

"Ah, yes." He was quick to let his hand fall to his side, licking at his bottom lip and perking his ears as the sound of her question. "Yes, I do."

"Then you'd surely love His Grace's library."

Will almost told her that he was fairly certain he'd love nothing that had to do with the man, but kept silent. The girl seemed too enthusiastic to have made a new friend as it were.

According to her, the Lecter Chateau's number of servants rotated on a seasonal basis; with only three servants remaining permanently in the household and no more than six employed at a time. Strange for a Duke, but stranger still when Will took into account the man's rumored cleanliness. Georgia waved it off as 'frugaliality' in one of the conversations she had only half-had with Will, who then continued to bob in and out of listening, but he figured that there was another explanation behind it; an explanation that Georgia was unaware of, and one that Will would never tell.

“It’s always quiet, here. Thankfully, I'm usually placed in the Gardens, taking care of the flowers and such; but even there I find that the silence can be a bit of a drag.” The girl said, waving her hand in the air as if she expected Will to find that fact just as annoying as she did.

"It's a large home, with only a few inhabitants." Will replied. "I wouldn't expect the area to be bustling with noise."

"I suppose not."

There was a puff at the end of her sentence, he thought he heard one at the very least, as if she was offended at his reasoning; but Will found that his answer made sense, as the house *was* large, and complicated, and filled with corridors and twists and turns that were so tangled that by the time one realized where they were walking, they had already ended up right back where they started. Even Georgia had gotten lost once earlier in the day, blaming her own newness in the position for the mishap; but Will took it as an indication that from now until he left, everything related to the damned house would be a maze. It didn't make walking through that maze any easier, though.

Four wings, each named after a point on the compass rose, three garden spaces, thirteen bedrooms and eight antichambers; too many for Will to remember or very much care for, but all explained with a fervent excitement and eagerness as Georgia moved him in and out and from place to place. After a time, she grew quiet, perhaps in an effort to save her breath for the next phase of the tour as she directed him to the West Wing towards the left side of the chateau; but Will took the time of silence to slink from under her view and turn right down the main hallway, shying from the brightly lit side of the home in favor of exploring the more cavernous one. If she asked, he'd blame it on simple curiosity. It wouldn't have been a *complete* lie, after all.

It was the smell of turpentine that attracted him to that side of the home, if he were to be completely honest; the odor of the halls slicked thick with the scent of resin and ammonia; and made even worse when combined with the sight of painting after painting hung high on gothic walls and illuminated by the sprinkles of sunset that could only slightly peek in through curtained windows. They stared at him, glared, even; those images of Nero and Chiron, of Dionysus and Cupid, and sat neatly in gilded frames that lined all up and down the hallway until stopping just beside a double-doored exit to the forested back of the Chateau. Aside from the floor and the doorknobs, they were the only things that were dusted in the entire space.

"As you can likely see, we go about caring for East Wing in a slightly more lackadaisical way, at His Grace's behest." She interjected suddenly from behind him, slipping over to his side and directing him towards the end of the hallway with the flow of her hand. He would have to get used to her puttering about, in due time; but the girl had a silent footstep and the presence of a poltergeist, and so it was difficult to detect when she left and when she arrived. Then again, Will was used to things sneaking up on him, physical or otherwise, and so wouldn't complain to her about it any time soon. In fact, he found that it would be beneficial for her; for if the demons in this house couldn't find her, then it would be easier for her to escape unscathed.

"At his behest?" Will asked, shamelessly trying one of the doorknobs only to be met with the stubborn clicking of a lock. He guessed that he'd receive the same result for the rest of the doors he tried.

“He seldom enters the rooms, you see." She wrinkled her nose. "Often, only to visit those who are unlucky enough to stay in them."

"What is the purpose of having rooms in your home if you never enter them?"

“The East Wing is a place for the ill and dying. From what I’ve heard, no one walks down these halls, aside from those who wish for death or those who knock on the door of it.” Georgia said winsomely. “It’s one of the reasons why no one ventures down here.”

“I never would have been able to guess that you were one for folk tales.” He joked, lighthearted at its core but unashamed in its hidden curiosity, and continued down the Main Hall with a roaming gaze and a purposely light step. There was something else *strange* about the place, he could feel it as he walked with Georgia, as every other hallway whispered words of ominousness that were heard by the spirit rather than the ears and rang out accompanied by the occasional trickling of water that echoed from rooms that seemed to have no inhabitants. Ever so often, Will would feel his ears perk and bend at the sound of wooden floorboards creaking behind doors that were locked shut.

Georgia turned to him and shook her head, as if wordlessly correcting a child.

“I simply prefer not to take death lightly.”

Will was no superstitious man, but he certainly didn't enjoy the sound of that.

"Besides, he's been known to visit this wing from time to time, Sir Graham." She continued. "Sometimes, we've see him come down here ever so often; stay in some of the rooms for hours at a time before leaving out of them again."

Will's eyes roamed again over the sight of the old white door sitting just across the hallway, the only one of its kind in the entire building, and paused in the middle of the hallway. “How much do you know about this place, Georgia?”

“I can assure you; I know nothing to the degree in which you think I do, and less than that about this wing." Said Georgia in response. "His Grace only allows certain people to venture down here, after all.”

Will hummed, and thought, and tried hard to play detective as he stared at the door and attempted to make connections where there was nothing to connect. He hadn't entered into this chateau with the plan of learning about Hannibal, but if he were to deliver the killing blow, he'd have to learn the man's habits, his reasonings, his mind. If Hannibal stepped into this wing before, opened one of the doors to one of the many locked rooms stayed put, and would he do it again? And for what purpose- to be solely sentimental, or proactive? If Georgia was right, and the East Wing was truly abandoned, then here could be where Will could wait, sharpen his claws and ready his fangs, and sink whatever weapon he could find deep into the back of the killer he had vowed to stop.

"But, I believe that concludes our tour of the house! I would accompany you to the gardens in order to get you acclimated to *those* , too; but the flowers are prettier when you explore them on your own." Georgia clasped her hands together and shook Will from his silence, her rounded black shoes seeming to float on the marble as she stepped further backwards and walked against the glow of the evening sun that slipped from the windows. "You can just get lost in them, you see. There are walls of the most *darling* roses, and these periwinkle tulips that go on for rows and rows, and these bushes that encapsulate the *entire* thing-"

With each word followed a brisk step back towards the northern wing of the house, and before long, Will was clambering to meet her paces, disregarding the mysterious room partly in favor of actually listening to the girl for once; not stopping or slowing down until the two arrived once again at his bedroom doorway and came face to face with another servant standing feet away from the both of them.

"His Grace has chosen to postpone the dinner with you tonight in order to take to more pressing matters of the household." He was fiddling with the ring on his finger, twisting it counter-clockwise every other minute. "He hopes that would be acceptable?"

"It has no choice but to be." Will nodded in a slow acknowledgement. "Thank you, for letting me know."

His response was met with a sharp exhale and swifter turn away, a haughty sort of exit for a servant, and his steps echoed in the space as he turned the corner and disappeared into the next hallway. He didn't fully leave, though; as his footsteps hadn't faded, they had *stopped*, as if he was waiting for something. Listening for something, Will's paranoia told him, but his curiosity was louder, and before he had thought fully about his actions, he found himself turning to his escort for one final time that evening.

“Georgia?”

“Yes?”

“Why do you all still call me Sir Graham? I am like you, a servant in this chateau.” Will rubbed at the bridge of his nose. “Handles shouldn’t still be necessary.”

“His Grace specifically told me to refer to you by your handle, Sir Graham." Georgia paused, taking time to turn her head towards the window as if the birds would provide her with the proper way to complete her explanation. "I suppose he doesn’t want you to forget your roots of your upbringing, is all.”

She didn’t give him time to interpret her response before she followed the other servant in his departure, floating away on steps too light for the echoes to catch and leaving Will leaning against his doorframe without another word of goodbye.

The roots of his upbringing, she said. The roots he refused to acknowledge, or the roots that were never nurtured to begin with? It was hard to say, but harder to try to guess; and so Will shook his head to the thought, took his iron pill, and quickly shut the door to his room, grateful for the relaxation he would be provided with at last.

If he would have been a bit more attentive, though, chosen to venture down once more to the East Wing, lightened his footsteps and straightened his spine, he could have been able to see the White Door from earlier open at last; and with it, he could have seen the things that lied on its walls and stained its floorboards before it closed once again. He would have seen Hannibal, his Duke, his *target*, as well; unlocking it and slipping inside with a goal only he could have known.

But the door shut and clicked locked undisturbed and unnoticed, and Will sat contentedly in his room without the faintest awareness of the Reaper that had just passed and the unavoidable death that had evaded his senses.

He wouldn't remain unaware for much longer.

Chapter End Notes

And we're back with another chapter- again, slightly late! This one may get edited tomorrow morning, but just to change some sentence structure/ add a couple fancy words.
On another note, its taking a large part of my strength not to shoehorn in a last minute Georgia/Randall ship in this- i think it would be cute idk idk

no. 8- Sphärenklänge

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will possessed no form of well-intentioned curiosity about Hannibal Lecter's habits; as he knew the man was a serial killer, and thus needed to know nothing else of his mannerisms, characteristics, or loved ones- if the man had ever truly possessed any in the first place. In his eyes, glazed over with emotions he still had yet to discern, Will needed only to know enough to hide in plain sight; to see enough to assess his striking point, and to learn enough to properly understand when in the hell he had to make his exit.

And it was for precisely that reason that he'd already come to despise these nightly dinners of theirs.

Was the man lonesome? Apparently so, given his last-minute request that Will arrive in the dining salon earlier than previously discussed. Strangely, it was almost laughable, and Will surely would have laughed at the thought if not for the presage of melancholy that sat sizzling at his back.

He couldn't control the huff that flew from him as he rounded the corner and moved to the dining salon- Miss Madchen had told him earlier that day that Hannibal intended to hold their private dinners in a smaller area- and paused to throw back his head and steal time to pop a few more of his iron pills into his mouth before he opened the door.

But in that room, he found no one.

In the stead of Duke Lecter's presence, what Will found there were knives, knives of every size, shape, and variety, hung nearly opposite a window; showcased for all of the world to see in their elaborately designed grandeur and fixed to a high enough location in the wall to escape the blazing fire seated in the fireplace below it. And what he saw under those knives, small and very nearly indiscernible on the floor he stood on, were drops of blood; brown, dried, and staining the wood that they sat on.

It was concerning, really, considering how the warm burgundy walls and lavishly designed furniture that sat neatly strewn about the place was all immediately offset by that gaudily gruesome display's appearance in the center of the room, but it still managed to command attention; almost as if it were shouting with pride and arrogance for the world to feast their eyes upon its presitige and ignore everything else that could have otherwise been considered important. To their credit, Will himself couldn't refrain from drawing closer; staring there at the blades that all pointed downwards in the same direction and shined with the purpose of accentuating their colors of bronze, silver, gold and stone. Had they been used? Could Will use them now?

"Do you like them?"

"I was trying to discern if they had been used before." Will didn't turn around, chose not to, and felt his ears twitch against his head as the sound of footsteps grew closer and closer towards the slouching figure of his back. Hannibal was beside him, now, slightly distant and still like the stone figure of Polydectes yet disgustingly ostentatious in his standing, and Will could smell sharp hints of pine aftershave as a rebel breeze carried the man's scent into his nose.

"They'd have no purpose on my wall if I hadn't. They are, of course, hunting knives."

"And what have you been hunting?"

"I live for the *thrill* of the hunt, Sir Graham." Hannibal's salacious words far from answered the question, but still he put a cool hand on Will's shoulder and dusted his fingers over his collarbone with a palpable pride in himself. "What my prey feels before they die, the sensation that wraps around their bodies and pools out of them in the warmth of their blood, the beauty of their crestfallen faces when they come to be at peace with the death I have signed for them. There's an enchantment in the gracelessness that I can never describe to you in a way that would be sensible for your ears to understand."

"I didn't ask about the *enchantment* ." Will replied, trying to smack his hand off of his shoulder. It failed, and the grazing of his knuckles on the back of the older man's hand only seemed to have the opposite effect from what was intended. "I asked you what it is that you hunt."

There was a sigh that escaped his lips, soft and able to make the hairs on Will's neck stand.

"Many things."

"Like?"

"Elk, Boar, Hare; back when I was younger and could run faster than I can now." Hannibal looked to the ceiling as he spoke, listing one after the other all as they fell in and out of his mind and idly rubbing the nape of Will's neck with his thumb. "And you."

"So that is what this is to be for you. A hunting escapade."

"Absolutely." Hannibal answered the question honestly. Will could have almost found himself surprised at the sound of it. "My intentions have not changed. Have yours?"

"Of course not." The answer sounded less solid than he wanted it to, but stood solid enough for Hannibal to accept it as truth.

"Then my confession of hunting you- your *mind* , to be more specific- should come as no surprise, then. Just as your intention to murder me is similarly obvious."

In turn, Will gave no reply, his eyes returning to the knives, and longed to hear no more of Hannibal's fantastical ramblings. To his pessimistic expectations, his wishes were far from granted.

"Do you enjoy waltzes, Will?"

“No.” Will answered, quick and curt. “I find them smarmy, and irritating.”

It was a lie, and an immature one, larded in irrationality and enveloped in ineffectuality, and Hannibal saw through it all as clearly as he would a window; huffing a chuckle through his nostrils as if the knowledge had blessed him with more misplaced confidence than he’d possessed previously.

“You seem unsure of your answer.”

“Who all has died in the East wing?” Whether the question was asked to spontaneously change the subject or grant him a bit more power in their conversation was unbeknownst to even Will himself. “Who all have you killed- relative or otherwise?”

"Why?" Hannibal responded, retracting his hand. "Do you think that would be the ideal place to dispose of me?"

He knew. The plan had not yet even started, had barely been conceptualized, and yet Hannibal still knew. The truth of his words and the truth of Will's naiveté was a howling, unsavory sound to hear, serving as anvils on Will's shoulders that threatened to break his bones and rattle his limbs, and Hannibal provided no respite to the tension of the room; instead leaving his side and slowly walking towards a window not too far away so to observe the oak trees that swayed this way and that in the distance of his garden.

"Do you think you can lie there in wait until you see me approach, kill me and then leave? Rid yourself of my body in one of those rooms that you've never yet entered?"

“Don’t parade around in this Castle of yours, pretending as if you know me or desire to know me." Will had grown defensive. "As if you see me as anything more than a piece of meat.”

"But I *do* know you, Will." Hannibal's voice never wavered, aged, and firm, and sharp. "I know what you want, and what you need. I know who lies inside of you, be it the you that the world knows or the you that hides even from your own consciousness, and I know who you *want* to be."

"Why else would I keep you here, let you roam freely around my halls despite possessing the knowledge of what exactly you're here to do?"

"Because you wish for your own death." He spat, words slipping like venom and dropping like the dead. "Because you underestimate me."

"It is precisely because I fail to underestimate you that I do this, Will. "

Again Hannibal made his rounds to Will's side, stopping there beside the fireplace and letting the sound of crackling birch wood overtake the room before he spoke. Briefly Will wanted to push him into the fire.

"A waltz is an entanglement, a *hunt* , if you will, between two breathing souls.” He said, and nodded his head towards the knives. “Each fighting the other in a beautiful war, every step

serving as a divisive strike in the battle that has amassed between them. It’s relentless. Exhilarating. Elegant.”

Heedlessly Hannibal grabbed Will's right hand and held it high in the air, grabbing at his waist and pulling him closer with a misplaced sort of desperation; and Will did nothing, again at a loss of what to do and how to do it.

“And the only time in which a true winner is crowned is when the dance has concluded.”

Will could feel the heat from Hannibal’s body radiate off of his skin through his sleeves, felt it burn through the man’s hand as it dripped onto his and cascaded down the side of his chest, and stood hardly breathing to feel it coil around him as a snake would its prey; and from the whole sensation, he could only guess that his quick breathing and clenched hands came from the disastrous combination of Fear and Adrenaline that had overcome him then just as it had the night of the soiree.

It was the only logical explanation he could come to.

"The East Wing will be of no aid or concern of yours, as I'm sure the maid has specified." Hannibal murmured. "And, as you'll soon find, our dance has already begun."

Will tried to move, prayed to God that Fate would simply let him have his way for once and allow him to run from the mansion with the speed of a fugitive, but Hannibal's grip was strong; strengthened even by the sight of his captive's struggle, and Will could do nothing but turn his head and stay in his arms.

"Would you ever allow me to use these knives, Hannibal?" The subject was changed. Hannibal noticed. Will knew he did.

“It all depends.” His voice was floating, gentle. Questioning, and yet sure of itself.

“On what?”

“How you would intend to use them.”

“They are hunting knives. Thus, that is what I would use them for.” Will relaxed the teeth that grit against his inner cheeks, fearing for injuring himself in the midst of what he could only describe as a dreamlike state and grasping at the largest bits of his inner strength that had evaporated from his body in order to strengthen his voice for the better part of his response. “Hunting.”

“Then, if I had the choice, I’d have you take this one for your trip.” Hannibal moved Will’s hand with a softness that felt uncharacteristically kind for a killer, shifting his thin fingers around Will’s wrist and directing it to the steel blade of a knife.

“Custom design, deriving from a dream I had as a child.” He could feel the heat of Hannibal’s sigh on the side of his neck; warm, misleadingly sensual, and circling under his jawline. “Its modeled after the snake that tempted Eve, spellbinding in its charisma and yet solely

responsible for the irrevocable tethering of man from paradise. Similar to the killing blow delivered to an animal, I surmised."

"It's small."

"It's lethal."

"That makes it useful enough then, I suppose."

"Whenever you are ready, take it." It was a sudden statement as Hannibal led Will's hand over the gilded hilt and positioned it there, ensuring that the feeling of it and the his soft palm on the bone of his wrist imprinted themselves on his mind, and let the touch of his other hand on Will's hip connect and settle so to leave a concealed reminder of the reality that would remain until he drew his last breaths.

"It would be more proper to ask first, though, would it not?"

Will looked again to Hannibal's face, the turning of his head promptly intercepted by Hannibal's profile inches from his, and stole a breath. He had never been this close to him before, had no desire to be this close *now* , but life always seemed to be turned against him; with Hannibal's grip secured on his body and their hands now together on the hilt of a knife.

Slowly, with a turn of the head that felt almost practiced, the Duke turned himself to face Will, staring him directly in the eyes that searched for answers where there laid only oxymoronic explanations to questions no one asked; and did so solely to let his voice sink into Will's ears with a rumble in his throat that felt nearly indecent.

"No one acquires their greatest wants by asking *nicely* , Sir Graham."

With that, Hannibal finally let go of his grip and stepped away- an action Will was all too grateful for as he took distancing steps of his own- and made his way towards the exit of the salon. In a strange, near cowardly form of retaliation, Will never took his eyes off of him, expecting him to return to his side once more, or reveal some horrible secret, or do something of a more sinister nature; but all he received in exchange for his suspicions was an offhanded question that spoke behind towering shoulder blades and echoed in the gap that stood between the two mens' feet.

"But, may I provide one further word of advice for your endeavors?"

"If you wish to do such." Will's answer was tentative, spoken in hushed tones and a heavy pitch.

"When you find your prey, while... *hunting* , be sure you don't miss in your killing blow." Hannibal smiled with thin lips, knocking twice on the door before twisting the doorknob.

"Otherwise, the waltz won't be as amusing."

Was that a threat? A suggestion? An ode to something deeper? His silken back was continued to be Will's sole focus even as he watched another servant enter the room in his peripheral vision, the sight of Hannibal's small gestures alone covering every inch of his

body in a spectral film that he could not see but felt stick to every hair on his goosed flesh, and he could only feel slightly calmed once the scent of meat and vegetables entered his senses. The food had arrived, accompanied again by two glasses of blood red wine, and Hannibal had turned again in favor of staring back at his guest with that indiscernible eye.

"Now, shall we eat?"

Chapter End Notes

So at first I was gonna drop this- because I figured "hey, its not like anybody likes it", but I decided to finish out the series after all.
Still though- this might get revised when i wake up 🏃♀

no. 9- Ennstaler

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Am I to be feasting on a corpse tonight, Hannibal?"

“Indeed.” Hannibal sat at the edge of a small dining table and gestured to the cart of food that had been placed by it with a single hand, insinuating for Will to replace the other waiter in his duties and set the plates in their rightful places. “A corpse of chicken, slaughtered early this morning and laid atop a bed of freshly murdered arugula.”

“Hm.”

When Will placed Hannibal’s dish in front of him and released it from its domed silver confines, revealing the meal to be exactly as the man had described, a wary sense of comfort wavered its way into his veins and danced jigs in his bloodstream; but he knew it was too soon to believe that the occasional truths Hannibal slipped into his conversation would make a common appearance while the men lived together. Will was paranoid, and that paranoia was a *good* thing; for it prevented Will from walking straight into a trap that he otherwise would have been aware of, as sweet as the lies Hannibal spun, as enrapturing as the charisma that he carried in his stride, and as deadly as the knives he used to slaughter his prey.

With a grunt Will sat across from him at the table, and after taking the lid off of his own dish, their battle commenced; every cut of chicken envisioned in his mind as a slice to his throat and every sip of wine being a stint of respite before the silence began and the eating continued, embers from the fireplace crickling and crackling in haughty delight at Will’s inability to grab that serpentine knife from its hilt on the wall and stab the Duke in the eye with it. He couldn’t do that, obviously, not in such a conspicuous way and certainly not in such a manner, but he could certainly entertain the thought of it. Threaten him with the possibility of him doing it, even. Just to unnerve him, see if the indurate mountain that sat across from him could be swayed at all; and if it could, use that to his advantage.

“If I told you that I was thinking of grabbing that knife on the wall and stabbing you with it right now, what would you do?”

“The same as I do now.” Responded Hannibal, unmoving as he had been minutes prior but now with an attention mainly devoted again to his dinner guest. “Continue to eat all until Death arrives to fetch me, clad in His gown and armed with His sickle and chain.”

“You say that as if you don’t fear Death.” Will spoke through a sip, removing the glass from his lips and swirling around what remained of his wine. “As if you don’t fear God, or what He may do to you once your time of judgement finally spins around you.”

“I’ve overworked Death and spat in God’s face, Will. If I feared either of them, I would not be sitting in front of you today.”

“You would have turned yourself in?”

“I would have hung myself, there.” Hannibal pointed behind Will with his fork, his eyes fixed on some location far in the courtyard that his servant could not see thanks to his cursed near-sightedness. “To serve as a reminder to those who I’ve condemned to this house, to state in my death that all of those who follow in my footsteps are to be blessed with the same fate.”

“Then it is a pity that you do not already fear them, Hannibal.” Will replied. “It would have made my life much easier than it is now, all things considered.”

“Your statements are usually quite distasteful, are you aware of that?” He spoke after some time, setting his fork down and picking up his glass to be temporarily enjoyed in the wake of Will’s sentiment.

“I fear it is habitual.” An indifferent sort of honesty burbled forth into the room. “My thoughts, actions, words; I would not describe them as tasteful. For as long as I have lived, they have never been… tasty.”

“Hard on the palate?”

“And excruciating on the mind.”

“Which hurts more?” Hannibal was interested, now, again; as he was and would almost certainly be most often whenever it came to his newest item, and cut at his chicken with quick and sharp knifework that failed to go unnoticed. “The struggle to accept them, or the ease to conceive them?”

“Whoever said conceiving them was easy?”

“I see it in your eyes, Sir Graham.” The man's response was soaked in a tone Will couldn't read. “The hunger in your stare, the attention to detail despite the lack of focus. You get lost in your mind.”

“It doesn’t mean that I’m conceiving anything in it.”

“No man can get lost in his mind without finding something along the way.” The plate screeched as Hannibal dug a fork into his meal, scraping the metal against that smooth porcelain and leaving it to hover over the rest of his chicken until his point had been made and finished in its entirety. “They may find dreams, they may find memories, or they may find thoughts. Distasteful thoughts, created and birthed behind the tautness of flesh and hidden in the subconscious places that one often forgets.”

“What do you find in your mind, Hannibal? In those places you speak so fondly of.”

“Often, a child’s vegetable garden. Some days, a bird’s nest. But mostly, I find thoughts." Hannibal answered. "Dark enough to keep men awake at night, and sadistic enough to rival any demon or monster.”

Soft chewing filled the room as Hannibal continued to eat; accompanied by Will, who had taken to again sipping the wine that had been placed at his own side of the table and taking

small bites of the vegetables that surrounded the main course.

“And do *you* conceive them, just as you say I do?” Asked Will, ashamedly curious but even moreso enraptured with the conversation he’d baited himself into. “Those...thoughts, of yours.”

“I do, and always have. After all, every calamity a man faces is caused in part by himself, and in part by the thoughts he chooses to adhere to.” The Duke replied quickly, as if the question itself had been some form of child's play. “Even the ones that lie hidden in our psyche, and the ones we try and fail to push away. In the end, I too must be a slave to the thoughts I create; as I am but a human, and thus have no ability to do otherwise.”

Will said nothing after that, as he then could think of nothing else to say, and so the silent battle began again, the decisive clinks and clanks of dinnerware filling the room but conveniently forgetting to replace the panic that had slowly begun to creep into the back of Will’s skull.

After a time that passed too slowly on the opulent clock that sat perched high on the wall above Hannibal’s head, the dinner had finally ended; and Will took no patience in standing up from his seat and heading towards the exit of the parlor room.

“Goodbye, Hannibal.”

“Goodbye.” bid Hannibal, standing with him and approaching the fireplace on the opposite side of the room.

“Oh, but Will?”

“Yes?”

“If you seek to kill someone in their own home, avoid stabbing them.” In seconds, and with an abrupt force that swept him from his feet and sent the world spiraling around his person, Hannibal pulled Will again into his reach, a hand gripped in locks of auburn hair and another pressed firmly on his gullet with practiced ease. “You choke them, instead; like this, and you keep your hold tight so as to prevent a peek from escaping their lips, ensuring that nothing they say can unnerve you.”

Hannibal's hand loosened on his neck and Will fell backwards, falling on feet he forgot he had and resting all of his weight on the gold gilded doorknob behind him. He couldn't breathe, though he felt his chest heave, and silently he looked up at the Duke with an expression he surely would have hated if he could have seen it on himself.

“I wanted to let you know that, for the next time that thought from earlier shows itself again in your mind.” Hannibal smiled.

“Good -*bye* , Hannibal.” The words came out in croaks, but the slamming of the door behind him was strong; and from that dinner, long and uncomfortable, Will learned three things.

Firstly, the threat of Death was one that Hannibal took lightly, and was accustomed to; and for those reasons, he could not be threatened with the idea of It.

Secondly, the only hope that Will could have to kill Hannibal lied in the art of surprise, as the man was too smart, too cunning and far to strong for Will to even entertain the thought of there being another possibility.

And lastly, Will learned that there truly was nothing worse in life than existing in the Lecter Chateau, as nothing made sense and everything seemed to be something else.

He had meant to scare him, to peel back his skin with the scalpels of his sentences and bury himself against his flesh, to nestle himself in there just long enough to retrieve the information that he wanted and the intimidation that he felt he needed; but in the end, he'd fallen into something else entirely that he couldn't have even put into words. Had Hannibal changed the subject, or had Will simply failed to press on in his interrogation? If he didn't fear Death, or God, then what did he fear, if he feared anything at all; and pray tell, would he even allow Will to use that fear to his advantage? What advantage would it even have for Will, whose plan had been thwarted not even three days after its conception?

Will's mind sputtered and coughed all as he navigated the halls and returned to his room, shutting the door behind his entrance with a soft click; but he knew he'd get no rest that night. His head was too hot, and his heart had begun racing, and the wall of knives had already carved themselves into his eyes as the possibility of one of them being plunged into his back while he slept finally leapt forth into his brain and lingered there. All of this time, Will had known that he was in the presence of a murderer, but only now had he realized that he too could *be* murdered; and that no one would be the wiser of it until his flayed corpse hung from the city streetlights and baked in the morning sun.

Hannibal saw, through black, distorted eyes, their arrangement as a game. A hunt. But who was hunting who, and who had more to lose once they died? Will knew that he had nothing to lose, but the way Hannibal spoke made it seem as if he had even less; and a man with nothing to lose and nothing to do but follow the nature he convinced himself was omnipresent held a presage of danger that was unavoidable to anyone whom he interacted with.

Click- Clack

The sound startled the anxious Will, who had since taken to lying down on his bed in the midst of his concerns and staring at a lacquered ceiling depicting the fall of Talus, and with quick steps he grabbed a paperweight and flung the door open; as he figured that it was best to be paranoid and prepared than anything else, and walked out into the hallway so to find the source of the noise. If it was Hannibal, he doubted that a paperweight would do much, but it could surely do something.

But it wasn't Hannibal. It wasn't anyone.

It was a black stag.

Feet away, its fur shining and reflecting the midnight blue of the sky above as it appeared there in the centre of the hall and let foggy breaths slip from its snout, growing from

translucent to invisible as they dispersed around the home and glowed against the moonlit wall. It was unphased by Will's movements as the man shut his door and stood there before it, dressed in nothing but his nightclothes and unable to control the heartbeat which pounded in his chest through leaps and bounds that threatened to bust a hole through his ribcage and dangle from his torso; and soon after, to the pace of fleeting minutes that ticked by only in the twitches of the trees far from the both of them, the stag promptly turned its head and walked away, as if it had thus achieved its goal and had no more reason to stand within the space.

Before it left, though; stunningly and strangely, it shrugged and shook, dust fluttering from its body and floating about the air, stared there at him through that soulless coal eye, and then it continued, simple and confident and walking as if it knew that soon, Will would launch himself into action after he realized that there were nothing more and nothing less he could do aside from follow it.

And so, quite accordingly, Will launched himself into action and followed it.

It was mad, and he knew it; but Will didn't stop walking, following that beast around pathways and staircases until he couldn't remember from which way he came and from which way he could return. His feet had gone cold and numb around four turns ago, his eyes had glued themselves in a half-open sort of squint by about the third staircase he walked down, but he kept walking, and following, and listening for the next direction as the sight of the stag faded behind far off corridors and eventually disappeared entirely.

The halls themselves transformed, wound and turned about this way and that, altered by the step and hollowed sound of hooves making their infamous pounding sound across the marble, and the howling of the breeze beside gilded windows crept through the glass and hung heavy on the extinguished candleflames that lined golden chandeliers high above his head. Every corner Will rounded was unlike the other, changing steadily even as he walked through them, but one thing remained steadfast. Only one thing remained steadfast.

Click- Clack

Why was it there? If Georgia had been here with him, or that stageboy, or even Hannibal, would they see it too? Would they too see its fur, or be similarly entranced with those emotionless eyes that feared no man and walked always with a heavy intention that rivaled those of men with a tenfold of its intelligence? Will sincerely hoped not, in his own admittedly callous selfishness, as every part of his nature told him in hot breaths that dragged along the veins of his neck and burned at the sides of his temples that the stag was his alone. His to see, and his to know. His to touch. His to follow. It was why his own bare feet made no sound when they flapped and slapped against the tiles, and why only the breeze and the shadows existed in the places Will passed; because nothing, no echo, no victim, and no vibration could rival the silent stalking of that black stag in vital importance.

Will hadn't realized that he'd been led outside until a pillbug crawled across the top of his foot and sank low back into the spongy ground, slick with the dew of night and enveloping his bare toes in a wet sensation he desperately wanted to shake off, and once he had realized where he was- or rather, where in the world he was- he realized that the stag had disappeared.

How stupid. Obviously there had been no stag in that building, but he had been sleepwalking; because somehow, he had allowed Hannibal's words and actions to settle so deep in his muscles that they caused him to get up and run as soon as his eyes slumped shut. He hadn't felt refreshed, and felt no traces of sleep on his face when he rubbed his cheek and scratched at his neck, but he was confident that it was the case. Otherwise, there would have been hooves, or patches of fur, or some trace of the beast he had convinced himself was real in the time that he'd been following it.

But there were nothing but flowers that surrounded Will, hydrangeas and peonies and roses, and no trace of animal or human were found anywhere around him. He'd made his way into the courtyard, he noticed; and now he'd have to make his way out of it.

And for a while he tried to, truthfully, navigating around what little hedgebush corners he remembered until the moon rose up to the middle of the sky and made her bed there, but once he reached a gazebo, large and out of place in the midst of the location, he'd been forced to come to a halt; as what he saw there he thought he'd never see in his life.

A little girl.

In Paris, for a long, long while, the sudden and grotesque deaths of the Lecters were the most mysterious occurrence that had ever struck the aristocracy of France.

Of course, rumors circulated, as they always did when rich idle minds had nothing left to do but ignore the problems that faced their lower class society and instead assign philosophical and hypothetical accusations to problems that had no true answer and were none of their business; but truthfully, no one knew what led to the deaths of the small family. It was only a mystery why they had been slaughtered so brutally, or why the sole survivor in the castle of over 43 people was fourteen year old Hannibal, who had been found drenched in blood, rocking in a small broom closet, and cradling the decapitated head of his mother for the four hours that had preceded his discovery and ‘rescue’; but the corpses had a clear and precise story to them. They’d been flayed and mutilated, with parts eaten and parts missing, and according to Jack, who often told the tale of the Lecters to a young Will in efforts to stop him from wandering around the gardens so often, not even God could save their souls or clean up their corpses.

But there, in the gardens, in the gazebo, one stood still before the living; little *Mischa* ,the youngest child, the only girl, the rumored to be dead and mutilated little one with no deserving sin or remorseful solace attached to her feeble body, in front of Will, breathing, and flowing, and catching sight of the world itself through awed azure eyes that yearned to twinkle in the sky with the rest of the stars above. And with a shaking, uncertain step, knowing that his eyes did not deceive him, he moved towards her still; for what rhyme or reason he did not know, and did not stop in his advances until the snapping of a twig under his foot broke both of their concentrations.

She turned to him. He didn’t move.

And never before had Will been so terrified.

God, he hated this house.

Chapter End Notes

Surprise! (One of these days I'm gonna actually stick to the bi-weekly schedule, I promise)
Hope you liked the newest chap.

no. 10-Corsaire

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Mischa?"

Will called out to her before she could fix herself to step down from her place in the gazebo and walk towards him, which in his mind provided him with the aid of a poorly-planned initiation of conversation that would ensure the girl that he hadn't been afraid of her, but it hadn't helped him by much. After all, as was the case with most brushes with the uncanny, the utterance of no word and no name could deny the fact that Will was paralyzed with the brutish feeling of unease that had sprung up from the wet grass below him and slammed it's burly fist into his nose.

"And if I was?" The girl answered his question with one of her own, stepping from her seat high on the gazebo's railing and standing on the wooden platform with a creak. "What would you do then?"

"I'd convince myself I was dreaming."

"Then I suppose that you should be delighted to know I am not, as you and I are both real and breathing in this space together." The more she spoke, the more Will noticed that the ends of her words swirled, like curves on the leaves of flowers and vibrato-covered coos of jaybirds. "My name is Clarice Starling. You are the new servant, yes?"

"Sadly, but I find that the recent acquiescence of my position to not be especially important in this situation." Will had grown braver now with her introductiob, brave enough to take another in a series of steps a part of him guessed he'd regret when tomorrow became today and the shock from this meeting would wear off.

She, *Clarice* or otherwise, really did look like Mischa; or at least the paintings of her that Will had seen strewn about the halls of the Chateau and the off-handed descriptions that had been handed down to Will along with a sense of exotic mysticism whenever someone would tell about the Lecters back when they were in their 'glory days'. With the exceptions of a few freckles scattered about in places on her face where they weren't supposed to be, blueish-brownish bags under her eyes that seemed to displace the notion of her presence being phatasmic as soon as Will realized they were there, and wildly cut blonde hair that rested unevenly just around the center of her neck to almost serve as a distinct contrast from the youngest Lecter's rumored to be flowing hair; the girl was a direct, albeit older and more frail, reflection of the ghost that seemed to haunt the halls.

Regardless, even after seeing all of those imperfections, a part of Will still believed himself to be dreaming.

"There is no need to be so formal. I do believe we have met before." At the sound of her reply Will stopped again, close enough to observe her features and allow her to observe his

own, but lingering back enough to maintain a clever distance just in case the worst were to occur. Will didn't quite know what the worst would be, in this circumstance, but he sure as hell hadn't intended to find out before the night's crescendo fell and morning rose once again.

"Come. It's gotten cold, here, and servants living in the chateau aren't to linger out after nightfall. " She spoke abruptly and clasped her hands together as if she'd arrived to some daring and final conclusion, having made the decision for the both of them and hadn't intended on hearing a 'no' from the man any time soon. "You look like you have questions, as do I."

"Wait." He extended a palm and held it mid-air there, pausing the exchange right at the end of it.

"Yes?"

Will opened his mouth and nearly let the words 'Have you seen a stag here?' tumble their way out of it, but grew wary seconds before and elected that it would be best not to say anything. He'd already known that there hadn't been a stag there, in the back of his head, and it would be stupid to question it to someone who he'd just met; someone who had to have been just as wary of him as he was of her.

"It's nothing." He allowed both the memory and the question to fade. "Nevermind it all."

Clarice nodded, stepped from the gazebo, and headed towards a place that no one awake and breathing could have known but her, and Will went with her; knowing that he had nothing to lose, but somehow even more aware of how disturbing the texture of moist soil and grass had grown to be on the soles of his feet.

In a final test of sorts, Will reached out to grab her wrist and wrapped his fingers around it; secret ulterior motives hidden under the excuse of him 'losing sight of her'.

Her skin was warm.

He could feel her blood pumping through her veins.

And those sensations alone assured him that somehow, he rested assured that he'd been returned to reality.

In the aftermath of their short walk together, they'd entered into the Chateau once again; in the East Wing, where omens of death still swarmed restlessly against the walls like disquieted ghosts with goals of gruesome dismemberment. They were amplified at night, Will surmised, the chill in the air coming from windows unopened biting at his neck and clawing at the exposed skin at his calves; but Clarice was yet unphased, walking down the hallway without even a question of discomfort. She was used to it. Will knew he'd never be used to it.

Down they went, past locked doors and gruesome paintings, until they approached the end of the hallway, where a lone door stood cracked slightly open. Clarice clicked her tongue at the sight of it, her obvious distaste for the room palpable, but she opened it fully; showcasing a large and tall room filled with painted faces just like the ones shown on the paintings that

lined the hallway. They were all incomplete, sitting on easels and joined by rough sketches too thin for Will to see without the aid of his glasses, and covered most of the room; save for areas specially designated for oil paints and marbled busts. It was organized chaos at its finest, disheveled and very nearly terrifying but somehow strangely beautiful when combined with golden halos of candlelight, and only Clarice seemed to know it best, as she walked into the room with no qualms and turned to wait for Will to follow.

“It defeats the purpose of my invitation for you to just stand there, you know.” Clarice’s voice was soft but ironically uninviting, as cold and as blank as the antagonistic breezes that swarmed about outside. “I don’t bite, and this room doesn’t either.”

“Right, of course not.” Honestly, Will doubted either of the points the girl made, though he knew her statements had to have been true, and took an idle moment longer than necessary before stepping foot in the room; allowing for the young lady to continue to widen their distance from each other as she buried herself behind easels, wrapped around old white drapes and added her own body to the methodical mess of art and supplies that lined the room and surrounded them both.

Once there, Will found himself enthralled by one easel in particular, the largest in the room and closest to the door, half-covered by its own muslin covering but not concealed enough to hide the visage of a dying woman's face in the center of it, flowing auburn hair growing tangled in the currents of tumultuous breezes and running in random strands across the center of a darkened room, flickers of candlelight revealing horrific shadows of coalescent tree branches and hands who held no owner that could be seen. Blacks and reds and yellows leapt from the canvas and seemed to strangle Will himself, daunting and carefully painted to amplify the hollow aloneness that sat there within the scene; yet nothing could allow the contorted face of a woman who once could be considered beautiful to be paled in comparison, brown eyes bloodshot and blue veins throbbing on her temple and neck like venomous parasites revealing themselves only in the death of their host. He could almost hear the woman's screams. He didn't want to.

“Psyche, soon after she discovers the truth of the Beast.” Clarice explained from behind him, her hand easing the rest of the muslin cloth from it’s position over the painting to display it in better shape. No thought or statement could prevent the heat from burning on the tips of his earlobes when he realized how clear to her his curiosity was, but Clarice didn't seem to mind; or pay too much attention to it, either, immersed in the deep blue strokes of her work that had recently dried and scowling at the parts that sat marked with woven impressions of fabric that had stuck to the canvas just before the background had dried completely.

“She’s suffocating.” Will cleared his throat and pointed at Psyche’s figure, noting the obvious as his eyes lingered on the woman’s fingernails digging at her own throat and roughly scraping skin from muscle.

“Wouldn’t you, if your lover left you to die?”

Explanations came easy through Clarice’s throat as she began to speak, pushing Will slightly leftward to stand beside him and coaxing words from pretty plum lips like they were figmented brush strokes deriving from her own mess of a mind.

“The air is cold, freezing even; much too hard and much too sharp for her to breathe in. Her warmth is gone, you see, and now darkness clutches at her clothes and threatens to drag her body back into the hell from whence she came." Will half-heartedly convinced himself that he could have discerned that without the aid of any guidance once he set his eyes upon the ghastly hands that had begun to blur together near the bottom corner of the painting, joined there by incomplete flickers of multicolored flames and reaching out to similarly condemn their prey to their own fate. "Her descent is inevitable, her mistakes irrevocable, but despite her struggles to stay afloat, she is at peace; as she understands that the only way to live in a world with the knowledge of her sins forever swarming around her is to not live at all."

“You are aware that the tale of Psyche and Eros ends well though, aren’t you?”

"Nothing ever ends well in reality. People simply choose to pretend that it does, shying away from the truth of the matter in favor of living peacefully in their own little lies." Clarice draped the cloth over the painting once more and threw her back to it, staring out of the window and stealing a sigh from the room. "A part of me is certain that the same can be said for mythology."

"So this painting is a reflection of what you believe truly happened to Psyche?"

“Its a reflection of what I believe should happen to those who sin with no intention of repentance." Clarice twisted her head slightly to stare at him from the corner of a tired eye. "I was hoping to give it to Hannibal once it had been completed. As a… parting gift."

“You know.” Will said it like an accusation.

“Of course I do.”

“Are you... with him? In his killings.”

“Why would I invite my colleague's killer into my own private space, Will?" Clarice spoke with irritation, a feeling that slowly transformed into curiosity the more she stared at him.

"You *do* still want to kill Hannibal, don't you?"

Will didn’t respond, because somehow, the both of them knew what the answer was.

“Come on, sit down." Clarice grew tired of the quiet. "I'll get you a glass of water. I didn’t bring you here for idle conversations or silent spats of sulking.”

He wished she had. He was uneasy whenever he spoke of anything else with her.

Clarice moved various art supplies in favor of clearing up space on a paint stained ottoman, smeared with black oil paint and stinking of turpentine. When she noticed the face he made, twisted and sour, she opened up a crack in the window and let the hints of autumn wind blow through. It helped; however not by an overwhelmingly positive amount.

“What are you doing here? How long have you been here?” Will hated opening up a conversation with questions. It left little room for the imagination, not that he had much of one, and to ask a question meant to look the person he was asking in the eyes. He asked

anyway, watching her as she slinked about the cluttered studio like a cat under moonlight, but was quick to turn away when her eyes finally returned to him and stayed there.

“I’ve been here for years. Eight long ones.” There was a grunt as her focus returned to fetching their glasses of water, reaching high on glass cabinets for cups and pouring into them water Will hoped was fresh. “A replacement for the dead, you could say.”

“For Mischa?”

Clarice froze, taking time to run her thumb over the handle of a gold-gilded decanter of water in her hands before placing it back on its rightful place at the bar. “I hate even the utterance of the name.”

Will's eyes focused on the lined displays of medications and elixirs that sat on the shelf just behind her up against the wall at the bar, some empty, some full, some half-opened. If they were hers, a thought of which Will found no reason why they wouldn't be, she'd been sick for a long while; and worse yet, nothing had aided her ailment.

“Is he holding you captive?”

"I didn't expect your questions to be this intrusive.” Clarice leaned on the counter and kept her back turned from her guest, her face hidden in the shadows as her answer hid in her throat. “Our arrangement is... *complicated* . Pseudo-social. I can leave any time I want, but here will always be my home. Does that make sense?”

“Not at all.” His voice swelled with callous honesty. "But I'd be lying if I said my confusion came as a surprise to me. Nothing in this house is ever able to be explained."

"Your being here has an explanation though, doesn't it?" She countered, quick comments interrupted by clusters of chaotic coughs. "As does mine."

“But you won't share with me your own explanation, will you?"

“In time, I might. It depends on how our conversation proceeds." Quick steps led to him a glass of water, handed to him for his own benefit, and so Will did the polite thing and took a sip; accompanying with it an iron pill to prevent him from hallucinating any other stags in the wake of their encounter.

"You said we met. Where?"

Clarice sat down on the ottoman next to Will, mumbling something as she sat about the way she hated that breeze on her neck, and set her glass of water on the end table beside her. She hadn’t gotten rid of all of her coughs, apparently- specks of sickness slipping through the repeated clearing of her throat- but Will didn’t say anything about it.

"The party, the other week.” The answer came blandly, like she’d expected him to remember her regardless of his own then rapidly declining health. “Where you’d been poisoned.”

“You saw it happen?”

Clarice gave a slow nod. “I’d wanted to warn you, you know- or help you, at the very least. But he was staring at me. He would have known you were up to something, at that rate.”

“He knew I was up to something regardless of your interference.”

“Touche.”

“Aren’t you curious?” Will found her calmness offputting in the grand scheme of things. Perhaps she’d already been used to breaking bread with attempted murderers in her lifetime. “About why I’d tried to kill him, that night, instead of someone else?”

“I find that curiosity only leads to knowledge no one wants.” Clarice shrugged and took a sip of her water, pensive but thoughtless. “I find it best to remain as stupid as possible when confronted with the lives of ex-high society members such as yourself.”

“But you know about Hannibal’s… pastimes.”

“And it serves as living proof that knowledge is a curse.”

“How much *do* you know, Clarice?”

Another shrug, another sip.

“I know enough.”

“That’s not what I’m asking.”

“But it's the only answer you'll get.”

“You asked me if I still wanted to kill Hannibal.” Will shifted in his seat, a thin leg crossed over another and dangling idly as he set a hand to his thigh. There was no point in pressing a topic that would venture no farther than it had in its beginning, so it was changed."What would you do if I said yes?"

“I would aim to aid you."

“I know that you want Hannibal dead. And I know how you can kill him.” Clarice turned to him with an unknown earnesty. “Let me help you.”

"How can I know to trust you, Clarice?" It was a distant question, but the heat of distrust ran close and could pierce through steel and bone. "I've known you for an hour. Hannibal has known you, *kept* you for eight years. Are you not loyal to him?"

“Earlier, you asked me if I’d been held captive.” Clarice began her answer quietly, and kept her tone as low as the rhythmic melodies of crickets that sang from meters and meters away. “I like to believe so.”

A lone index finger traced along the rim of a glass, followed by a sigh and accompanied by a far stare that seemed to look past closed doors and settle somewhere farther than either of them could ever travel. “I was young, and tired, and left with nothing but the promise of a

maggot-infested death when Hannibal found me. When we spoke, he promised me comfort, and I allowed myself to be carried away by him to his own chateau with the hope that he'd be the savior to my then condemnable life; accompanied by the thought that maybe, I'd even get to be the princess that I dreamed of when I had nothing else to dream. Instead, all I became was a prisoner in my own personal hell and a servant of sickness. All I desire is to be free from it."

"And if I must buy my freedom back in blood, it would be all too small a sacrifice."

There was age and isolation in her face, irreversibly scattered across sunken pores and reflecting against the sky in iridescent shards resembling that of a broken teacup. Will hadn't known how they emerged there, or for what purpose, but they didn't belong. Nothing about Clarice belonged where it was, but there she stood still, gone from her position next to him on the ottoman in favor of standing before him with an open palm and a question of newfound loyalty; presenting to him a chance that felt to be the only one he had left and swearing to aid in saving him from his own demise before he'd fall too deep into it. He still did not trust that Clarice, and would make no implications to portray the notion that he did, but he trusted that chance more than life itself. As it stood, he could either grab it or let it go.

"And you're sure that you know how to kill Hannibal?"

There was a silence that shook the earth itself for as long as it revolved there between them.

"Of course."

Will grabbed that chance and held it firmly, and the ample ticking of Mother Time that flowed amidst the room sealed their bloodless covenant the instant it had been formed.

Now, all that remained was the divulgence of a plan.

Chapter End Notes

These late updates are a menace to my society
Either way, Clarice has arrived! (turns out it wasn't a ghost after all)
We can only wonder what little plans the two have now started to devise.

7/15 Edit: Clarice was meant to say his 'questions' were intrusive- not his 'answers'
9/08 edit: added a stray sentence

no. 11- Sentimentales

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

For the first time in years, he dreamt of nothing.

Or was it nothing?

Will didn't know, as dreams were fickle; and they often chose when they did or did not want to be remembered. He could almost have told himself that his entire charade with the Clarice girl had been a dream, and it would not have taken much effort given the stag he'd hallucinated a few moments before meeting her, but the experience was too fresh on his mind. It felt too raw, like a yellowing bruise on his brain, and so even if the rest of his dreams from that night would elect to be forgotten, the memory of that encounter would always remain and remind him of his true reality. Similar to everything else he'd experienced there, of course.

But regardless of the reality of the encounter, regardless of the acceptance of his five hour rest and regardless of the fact that Mother Moon had disappeared in the time it took for his eyes to close and open for the last time that night, the absence of a dream in his memory left him wary. Uncomfortable. It was a disturbance in a constant, another in a series of disruptances, and Will was a man who never took kindly to changes in routine. Even if it was just a forgotten dream, a trifle of a problem, the point was that Will never forgot his dreams. But here, now, he did. That made him paranoid, and after the heavy conversation he'd had the night before, Will had been sternly told by Clarice that he couldn't afford to be too paranoid anymore.

Either way, he found it best not to ponder it any longer. In the end, there was something of greater importance that sat right in front of him.

The rest of the night had quickly passed since his first meeting with Clarice, and in the time it took for Will to fall asleep and for the sun to emerge from the trees, another person had been murdered.

A man, this time. Quite tastefully done, in the worst way possible; hands bound by rope and tied to his bed frame, his penis stuffed down in his throat, nails made for construction hammered down under his fingernails until they broke through the skin of his knuckles, and his body fastidiously split down the middle with what were rumored to have been garden shears. Jack would have been able to tell Will more specific details, details that he wouldn't have wanted to know, but he had seen nothing of the man since Will first told him of his then newfound departure. Instead, he received the news from someone else.

"How did you find out about all of this, Hannibal?"

Will picked away at weeds and stooped at the edge of Hannibal's garden in the early hours of the morning as his first servantly duty; the man himself sitting feet behind him, reading

another book with a title Will didn't care to learn, and disclosing the details of the latest victim’s death in a way that ruined the day before it even started.

If he'd known Hannibal would have been this close to him beforehand, he would have elected that Georgia provide him with any other task; but what was done was done, and Will was stuck in yet another conversation he hadn't wanted to be in.

"An acquaintance of mine saw it. Sadly, he's been known to have the most dreadful luck whenever it comes to seeing things he shouldn't." The older man explained. "Ironically, though, he finds the sights of corpses to be quite amusing."

"I don't believe a person like you could have any acquaintances who *wouldn't* find death amusing." Will's back remained turned from him, his hands rustling deep in the roots of hydrangeas and growing damp with the morning dew that pooled beneath the grass.

"Did you do it?"

"Do what?"

"Kill him." Will said the answer like it was a simple addition to an otherwise normal conversation.

"I hardly kill without a reason, Will."

“If that’s the case, then I suppose your 'reasons' must be trivial.”

“But they’re reasons nonetheless.”

“If you’re trying to ease my suspicions on your hand in that man’s death, I’m sorry to say that you’re failing. Your words don’t make you look less guilty.” It was a pointed answer, yet one that hadn't changed the Duke's expression an inch.

“They aren’t meant to.” Hannibal replied, an idle fingertip flipping over another page. “I’m not here to deny my sins, and you aren’t here to pry into my denials. To attempt to ‘ease your suspicions’, as you put it, would be wasting both of our times here, and sullying both of our goals.”

“I’m still not entirely sure just what your goal is for me, Hannibal.” Will murmured, flicking dirt from his hands and standing from the border of the garden. “Your real goal, that is.”

“Good."

“Do you really get your thrills from running me in circles, Hannibal?” Will inquired, ansty eyes tracing ellipses back and forth around the perimeter of the garden wall. “Is it nice to spend your days tinkering with my mind like a music box and spinning my questions off into conversations I never want to have?”

“Or do you just like reminding me of the power you think you hold, to the point in which you forget that the rest of the world exists?”

His eyes stopped suddenly at the end of his sentence, falling and remaining on a small, red-headed servant who walked through the grass with an aimless stride. He didn't acknowledge either of them. To Will's palpable surprise, Hannibal hadn't acknowledged him, either, the man's chin leaning on a balled fist and waiting for his apparent plaything to conclude his soliloquy.

And so he did, turning to the Duke with eyes still fastened on the boy who made steady steps towards total disappearance.

"What makes you think that, Will?" There was the sound of wood creaking as Hannibal leaned further into his chair. "Tell me."

"It's not hard to come up with the idea." Will replied, staring at the boy in front of him until his pair of slender shoulders dissolved into birch trees and did not come out from them. "Especially when one sees how you ignore the other servants who work in your quarters."

"I like to think I provide all of my servants with the blessing of conversation." Hannibal sounded almost defensive, the chair creaking again all while he reclined backwards and folded an arm over the other.

"With the exception of him, right?"

Will turned, expecting a shallow nod or another impossible look, one that defined the beginnings of wrinkles on the older man's face and made him feel like a fool in the hall of a king, but there he stood and saw nothing at all, aside from a raised, greying brow and an index finger pressed against his lower lip.

"What, did you not see that boy walk past?" Will nodded his head to the bushes, hoping that the other servant would make a timely exit from them. To Will's regret, he never did.

"Ah." Hannibal's reaction was delayed, but his face quickly returned to the state it had been in before Will's observation. "No, I hadn't noticed him."

It wouldn't have been difficult for Will to withold the annoyance that breached his features, yet he didn't try to disguise it. "But you'll somehow manage to notice everything else, won't you?"

"Often, I only notice the things and people which I find important."

"Like the girl you're keeping captive?" A line with no real reason to be crossed was breached, signs of Will's arrogance peeking through the holes of a mesh-like cowardice that had slowly begun to break down; an unwise decision made solely after stints of sleep deprivation and a belief that the girl he met the night prior convinced him that he stood on the edge of his salvation. "Clarice, if I'm not mistaken. Bears a striking resemblance to your younger sister, as well."

Will approached the doorway, his work done and his body prepared to take an early exit, but he continued to speak; to prod and pry and gloat of the successful gathering of information he'd chanced upon.

"Is she supposed to be her replacement; a second chance at keeping what you lost already? Or is she just a pet you keep in a cage?"

"So you've met her." It was Hannibal's only response, another page flicked from left to right as the sight of Will's gaze was purposely avoided.

"I have. Did you not expect me to?"

The Duke said nothing as Will stood frozen in the doorway, awaiting a response that never arrived. He assumed the silence came from weakness, confusion, fear; emotions Will had never stopped feeling since the day he stepped foot onto the grounds of the Chateau. The thought of making Hannibal feel as he did sent joyful vibrations up and down his skin.

"You aren't the only one who can find weaknesses in other people, Hannibal." Will's head turned, a hand placed on the left side of the door frame and a voice drenched in the wetness of a sneer. "From now on, I'd advise that you pay close attention to how you step in these next few days."

His speech concluded, Will left Hannibal to his own devices, unspoken words reminiscent of black frostbite on his tongue stinging his throat with the pleads of release all as he spun around corners and strolled through hallways.

It was a guilty, rare pleasure to speak the way he did to the Duke, Will surmised with a haughty air about himself, but the ability to discard the feeling of sudden concern that sunk into the pores of his skin was slowly evaporating the longer he walked alone, comforted by no one and left to swim in his personal cesspool of suspicious sensation. If he'd truly managed to usurp the slated emotional state of Hannibal, dig under his skin with the weapon of a weakness meant to remain unknown, then the fact that a petty retribution would find its way on Will's doorstep was made obviously evident. That made the future dangerous.

It hadn't mattered much, then, though; seeing as how Will wholeheartedly believed that his time in the chateau had finally begun to reach its conclusion. Clarice had ensured that, based on what he told him.

Really, Clarice told him many things.

In their conversation the night prior, after the issue of their introductions had been nicely sorted and the shock of there being yet another person in the manor had subsided, Clarice took her time in telling him of the plan she'd concocted over the course of the past few weeks.

Then, she spoke of death so easily; taking to placing a slender paintbrush between two nimble fingers and swiping quick strokes on that gloomy canvas all as Will listened with anxious ears.

In the East wing, in that room with the White Door which Will had passed time and time again, laid an opportunity to rid the both of them of Hannibal, as it was the only place where he and he alone ventured into whenever the day turned to night and the rest of the world disappeared behind closed doors and shut curtains. Only he and Georgia held the keys to the

room, according to Clarice- and if Will could steal that key somehow, the rest of the plan was theorized to all fall into place that same night.

Clarice would incapacitate him somehow a few hours prior to the murder, render him useless with the aide of food and drink; and once he escaped into the White Room, there would be where Will was waiting behind the door, a knife or other sordid weapon wrapped around his hands and his breathing slow. When Will raised suspiscion on just how he'd be able to overpower the larger and more experienced Hannibal, Clarice assured him that he would not be killing him alone, as she would be trailing close behind their victim to serve as assistance to the murder in the case something proved to be an unexpected challenge.

All it would then require is a well placed stab in the chest.

And finally, Hannibal would be dead.

Then, two would escape to Hannibal's hunting lodge in Spain in an inconspicuous black carriage and remain there until all suspicion waned and the watchful eye of France's elite society wandered off to rest on another, more interesting matter. Maybe one such as the Queen's latest hairstyle, or why no one especially preferred the taste of red wine on sweltering summer evenings. People like Hannibal never mattered for long in the world Will lived in. Provided that neither she nor Will made the heedless decision to derail the entire idea of it, the plan was promised to work, and so quickly the both of them were to begin in their individual endeavors; the sole focus being achieving their goal and killing Hannibal as quickly as possible. In Will's mind there still remained a prick of doubt; as that night, Clarice had given him no real evidence that she would be able to abide by the plan she discussed with him. After all, despite the things she said then, Clarice was young, her age lingering somewhere between the numbers of eighteen or nineteen, and a child like that was guaranteed to be naive. Intelligent, talented, even- yet naive. Her eyes told him so.

And so he would have to watch those eyes of hers, for as it stood, he trusted her less than he trusted himself.

"Sir Graham? Have you completed all of your gardening duties?"

The words piped up from the corner of a room as Georgia stepped from it and shut the door behind herself, quickly scurrying over to Will's side and reamaing there as he walked down the main hallway.

"Quite nearly, Georgia." Will had grown used to seeing her popping about here and there, like a small field mouse scattering all about the Chateau. "The space in front still needs to be done. I'm headed there now, in fact."

"I do hope that you don't find your chores to be too difficult, Sir." Replied Georgia. "I wanted to provide you with an easier task, as did His Grace. We found tending to the flowers to be the most outstanding option for you."

"Oh, no. It's all very fine."

Whether due to slow steps or unconscious sluething, Will slowed his steps to trail slightly behind Georgia, and allowed eyes with pinpointed pupils undisturbed by the sulight flickering in through the windows to see the silver keys jingling against the side of her waist, tightly bound to her dress and bobbing up and down with every quick step she took. He felt nearly inclined to reach out and take them, but was stopped by the feeling of hot stares on the side of his neck that inched up and down in two seprate directions, quite unhuman but still real in the wake of the day. It was a terror to turn to it.

But he did, his neck like a squeaking swivel that inched towards the cause of the breeze in the air, and looked to face the boy from the garden; red hair like bonfires in the middle of june displaced this way and that about his head, his body constituted of pink and tan paints and placed neatly on the surface of an otherwise starry canvas, and accompanied by the signs of the zodiac that surrounded him and laid equally as lifeless in the middle of that canvas with him. Eros, he was depicted as according to Will's best estimation; but there on that painting he was a figment of someone's imagination, and hours before he was real, breathing and feeling and staring with the same green eyes that stared at him now.

"It's uncanny, isn't it Georgia?"

“I don’t believe I know what you mean.”

“Yes, well-” Will began to justify himself, pointing at the face of Eros with an almost accusatory air about it. “Of course, he didn’t have as innocent a look in his eyes, but you have to see the resemblance between he and the boy who worked at the gardens this morning. Its unnatural, almost. Don't you see it?”

“No, no.” Georgia shook her head and took to readjusting herself as she glanced up at the painting, leaning the laundry basket on her chest. “There was no one else assigned to the Gardens but you today, Sir Graham- and especially none who looked like him.”

“What?”

“His Grace specifically requested that he be left alone in the Gardens while he reads- with the exception of you, of course.” She didn't provide a warning before beginning to walk, quick and ghostly strides threatening to abandon him in the midst of his confusion. “He greatly enjoys your conversation.”

The eyes of Eros continued to look at Will all as he diverted his focus from it and returned to Georgia's side, pupils set in paint almost moving with the steps he took and beckoning him to return and bask upon its glory. After a time of silence, waiting for the sensation of being looked upon to ebb from his mind, Will returned to his talking with the girl a ways ahead of him who actually lived and breathed.

“He enjoys my torment, Georgia.”

“Your jokes are quite amusing.” The girl added a half-chuckle into her response. “It’s alright, Will; everyone here was once tired of working in the Chateau like this. I’m sure that after a bit more time, you’ll be better than I am at cleaning about the house.”

“Of course, that’s not to diminish your title, Sir Graham.” Her head moved with her neck in one fluid motion downwards, a sort of half-bow that felt forced. “I do understand that your work here is a temporary arrangement.”

“It’s quite alright, Georgia.” In turn, Will patted her head, the only thing he could think to do in the situation. “Thank you, for placing a bit of your faith in me.”

“Of course."

He nodded as he released his palm from the top of her head, placed it back in its rightful place down by his side, and vanished to complete his work in the gardens, leaving Georgia alone to stare down at him and wait fruitlessly for the man to turn back around before he escaped into the front of the house and forgot of her existence until they happened to meet again. He never did.

What did it feel like, to be a flower in the garden of Hell; to blow against the winds of months that passed like seconds on a clock, to constantly have endured through the cycle of life without having a true say as to how you should live or die? Strangely, it was a question with an answer in which Will did not know, only thought he knew, and so he stooped by those rows of crysanthemums and stared at them; fragile white reflections of a needless preservation of self rooted in soil they'd never realize the true value of until they'd been plucked from it. Will stooped there and stared, waited for time to reverse and feeling only disconcertment when he realized that it never would, and let the remaining seconds of the day pass through doors they'd never return from as he uprooted weeds from their places and fell into the despair of routine.

He only realized the extent of time that had passed when the sounds of voices by the side of the chateau echoed through arched pathways and settled themselves in whispers in his ear, reminiscent of halfway familiar, sin-like secrets that Will was not meant to hear.

"He's taking them well enough, Sir." A small, quiet voice sounded from the doorway in the sound of a raspy whisper. "As it stands, I don't believe he's caught on."

"And Hannibal?"

"He's behaving differently, as you stated previously." There was the sound of that same voice, that same whisper, unknowingly heard but rightfully paranoid. "It seems that-"

Will rounded the corner, a pale hand placed on the sharp concrete edge of a wall, and stood before the two men with a memory that only recognized one.

“Jack?”

Chapter End Notes

lmao its been a minute
hey yall

no. 12- Tragiche

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Leave.”

The servant Jack had spoken with scurried away with the fluttering of early autumn leaves the moment he uttered the word, escaping into the backdoor of the kitchen and disappearing there. It felt comforting to know Jack’s words continued to hold weight over everyone he hurled the loathsome things at; though the feeling dissipated when Will remembered those heavy words likely still had power over him, as well.

“What are you doing here, Jack?” Will inquired, slapping dirty palms against each other before crossing and resting them on his forearms. “I wouldn’t fathom you’re here to visit me.”

A certain crack befell Jack’s face, large pores and wrinkles contorting as a look of monotony transformed into one of general displeasure, yet it mended itself to its best ability the moment it realized it had shifted. Will hadn’t bothered to pinpoint the exact emotion the crack belonged to. Regret, offense, anger, it was all unwarranted.

“I’m not, Will.” Jack responded. “Though it is good to see that he hasn’t done anything to you, yet.”

“If he had, would you have cared?”

“Will.”

“Your informant, is he?” Will scrunched his nose and ingested an iron pill from his pillbox, quick to shift the topic. “What has he been telling you? What have you been asking?”

It took a breath, a quick refreshing of inner power for Jack to respond.

“The Blood Killer has been behaving more sporadically. Attacking people with a faster rate, a more deathly precision. He has an aim, now.” He allowed the subject to change. Conversations based around topics as frivolous and honest as the mind were hardly held between the two men, as Will nor Jack wanted to discuss the idea of either one of them caring for each other as family were supposed to. It made sense, but the fact continued to sting. Only Will seemed to see Jack as a father, and only Jack seemed to see Will as an asset.

“Hasn’t Hannibal always had an aim?” Will cleared his throat and looked up towards the second story window, catching a glimpse of something hurrying off from the view of its glass panes before he could get a veritable look at the thing who stood behind it. “He aims for those who won’t be able to stop him.”

“He did. That’s why I’m here.” The curtains of the window were still swaying, a shadow of a silhouette peeking in from the edge of the windowsill every moment the curtain would stray too far from its proper place. Whoever it was seemed to be near, waiting for Will to lose focus, but all as Jack spoke, he did not. “We have reason to believe that Hannibal is no longer working alone.”

“Do you have reason to believe I’m his accomplice?” Will’s response left the side of his lips as a string of murmuring words loosely connected by the threads of accusation and hasty defensiveness.

“I believe you may be his next victim.”
Jack emphasized the words with a particular gravity about himself that made Will turn back to him.

“Recently, Hannibal- The Blood Killer- has been killing with an aim towards the bourgeoisie. Those in their prime, those past it, those just before it.” He gave Will the burden that came with concern in a single look, insinuating that he was one of the three people he listed but refusing to specify which he meant in the case of Will himself. “Prior to, the murders had been random. Now, there’s a pattern.”

“There had always been a pattern, hadn’t there?”

“None that we knew of, and none I would have let you find.”

“And so now what are you going to do?” The question floated and fell on deaf ears, then was repeated again; more honest, less shaky. “What do you want me to do, Jack?”

Will asked the question in earnest, expecting something along the lines of another command, another need, another call to move. It was almost comical, how much Will detested being used but was always prepared to be, like a man denied a drip of opium but more than welcome to pluck the flowers that held the drug.

“Nothing.” Jack answered.

It seemed both the flower and the drug would be denied to Will, this time.

“I only want you to be observant, be careful.” The man continued, lighting an old golden pipe gifted by Will’s father so many years ago each one felt like it had its own lifespan. “We have no reason to think you are exempt from the Killers’ spree, especially when you sit and dance in their very mouths.”

“Then why did you-”

“I told you this only because you have a wandering mind, Will.” Will watched a heavy sigh travel through Jack’s body and into the air, thick nostrils flaring with the exhale. “If it isn’t obvious to you, if it’s made too obvious to you, you’ll begin to think. I don’t want you thinking more than you have to. I don’t want you doing more than you have to.”

“I want to tell you the truth; but only enough to warn you of what dangers may lie behind it.”

“Warn me? Of something I would have discovered even without your pointed observation?” Will replied. “You linger over me every chance you get under the guise of maintaining my protection, yet when I live in the presence of a killer, you disappear.”

“In the week I've been here, I've gotten nothing from you. I’ve been alone, trapped in these walls, trapped with these whispers and paintings and people who appear one moment but vanish the next; and yet you preach of warning me." He continued with relentlessness. "I need no warnings from you, Jack."

“Two weeks.”
“What?”
“You said you’ve been here for one week. It’s been two.”

“Look at that.” Will replied, off-handed and especially annoyed. “You count the days better than I do, and you aren’t even here.”

“Tell me something, Will.” Jack took one step, then another, and had breached an impossible distance in order to stand right on Will’s ribcage and pull his heart close by the collar. "All this time, I believed this was to be your way of proving to the world that you're a real man. That you're strong enough to handle catching a murderer, despite never stepping foot on a crime scene. Have you given up before you even started? Is this your way of neglecting your own responsibility in the mess you’ve gotten yourself in?"

Will elected to answer neither of his questions. "Don't say that like you didn't put me in this situation."

"I didn't. You did." The retort was quicker than Will had expected, quick enough to cause a reflexive step backwards, but Jack kept the distance tight. "I never told you to serve Hannibal like a rotten criminal after you made that mistake that night. You chose this for yourself. You had something to prove."

"I told you I had it handled long ago. I told you if you gave me another opportunity, I would amend what I did."

"And I knew it was a damned lie the minute you told me."

“But if you would have just given me a chance before readying yourself to send me off; let me stay, convinced my father to have me try again after I'd had that dinner with Hannibal. Then, I wouldn't have had to prove anything to you.”

“Then what would you have done, Will?” Still that grip on his heart tightened, twisted and contorted aroud each one of Jack’s fingers and made his blood run like slick rivers in winter. “Tell me. What would you have done to aide me, to aide your father? Would you have stabbed Hannibal for us? Pushed him into traffic, even? How could you have done anything at all, how could we have trusted you to do anything at all, after what you did and how you failed?”

“I said it before, Will. We tried to push you past your limits, and when we realized you were incapable, we were prepared to place you somewhere that you would never have to push those limits again.” Jack’s voice grew deeper each word he made, spoken like descending steps down a winding staircase. “But you? You’ve already pushed yourself too far, Will. Just how much do you think you can bend before you break?”

“You were prepared to get rid of me, Jack. Prepared to treat me as if I were some invalid, some sort of failure, and I’m not. I never have been.” Will stared up at Jack and upturned his face in a scowl, words like knives being snatched from his stomach and returned to who cast them. “If it means proving that alone to you, I’ll break myself into pieces.”

"All I ask is that you be careful, Will." He raised a hand to the air and called for his carriage, growing tired of arguing. “I won’t let myself see you in a coffin.”
There the carriage arrived and there Jack walked towards it, steps like lead pipes thumping on concrete blocks before resting on a gilded step.

“Even if you put yourself in it.”

And with that, he was gone, leaving Will again to his own devices and his own hell with a worse mind than he had before.

What did he think he’d do, saying a thing like that? Worse yet, was he right?

It was hard to guess whether or not the man cared for Will when he batted around emotion and general apathy so often that Will could hardly tell which was which, and as it stood now, he didn’t know whether Jack was warning him to be careful or chestizing him for being who he was. The answer was likely both, but it was not one the man considered; even after he returned into the manor and left the remaining weeds in the garden to live for one day longer.

If it was his fault, all his fault, then was it too late to change his tactic? Was it so bad if he’d began again to regret the decision he’d made now that Jack had warned him as he did, even before the knife had been plunged in Hannibal’s back and sticky red blood crawled onto Will's hands? Will knew it was the moment the questions formed in his mind. It was much, much too late. Moreover, it was a worse thing than bad; it was terrible, immature, irresponsible, *fun*, a flagrant chess match that he'd slowly found himself to enjoy the closer he got to killing Hannibal. At last, with the aide of Clarice, he felt as if he'd finally began to win the game at hand, and though Jack's warnings had wormed their ways into the forefront of his brain like parasites, they could not stop the path Will had chosen to walk on.

Ultimately, Will felt things he could not suppress, and Will did as he felt, and the feeling of need to prove himself to Jack and beat Hannibal at his own game came just before the feeling of running back to Jack’s carriage and begging him to fix the mess he'd gotten into. This was what had put him in this situation. This is ultimately what kept him in it. Perhaps that ideology, that *feeling* was what Jack was so wary of, why he labeled him as unstable and thus unusable.

Still, wasn't this what Jack wanted? What his father wanted? For Will to just once prove his worth and ability in a world they were certain would swallow him up the moment he stepped from it? Why was Jack warning him now, after casting him to the fire and then being angry whenever Will chose to dance among the flames? Did he know something that Will didn't, smell the sin in the air like a black smog that refused to dissipate? It was Jack who was the man in question, a bloodhound with scars Will couldn't see but knew stung the man's skin like burrs on bristly fur, so such a thought could have had merit. Jack knew everything. Will knew nothing.
That fact made nothing better.

As he approached the end of the hallway, anticipating the sweet release of rest that would occur the moment he stepped into his bedroom and collapsed onto the fibres of his bed, Will felt his legs stop at a halt as the sound of slow, continuous dripping echoed from the East Wing, the repetitions of each sound like a letter in a paragraph that went at a pace too slow for Will to piece together. It was not his business, issues in the East Wing were issues often left to Georgia and Georgia alone as he had quickly found out a few days ago, but the feeling of curiosity beckoned him forward. So he went.

Step, step; he walked from the west wing hallway and into the parlor which served as a partition between the two wings, tile replaced by carpet under thick soled shoes that made his feet feel hotter with every pace he made. The stone busts and paintings Will walked past had eyes that stared, eyes like the painting of Eros that blinked and moved only for him, watching him, mocking him. Again, he found himself in the psuedo-dream state in which he was in when the stag first appeared before him the night prior, his vision dull but senses clear; and as the double doors which served as the last barrier between he and the East Wing were opened by rubbery fingers, Will approached that dripping sound with the best of his ability and the worst of his mental understanding. It was not a long walk.The moment he found the source of the noise, he wished it had been.

It would have given him more time to turn back around.

There hung the body of his sweet mother in the center of the hallway, swaying slowly left to right against a taut hemp rope as the lining of her small intestine was pulled out by pitch black hands and stuffed into the mouth of a wicked monster that sat before her on the tile, sitting cross-legged and nude amidst a pool of blood and maintaining a heavy focus on it's meal stuffed between thick palms. The crunching alone inflicted upon Will an insurmountable feeling, but to see his mother there, animated yet dead, real but fake; it froze him to his very position. Wanting to save someone whose existence had been wasted then and wasted now, Will stood and watched his mother's body grow loose as her torso became an empty cavity and the organs which laid within it disappeared.

With horror, Will looked to find her ribs broken, each cast to the floor and littered with chunks of muscle tissue which refused to release themselves from the bone even after they had been ripped away. Her skin too had been torn apart, the bright yellow fat of her stomach lining moist and glistening amidst the brightness of the open air around her corpse. At last, Will had observed the lifeless head of his dearest mother; leaning limp sideways as the pressure of the rope had snapped her delicate spine in half, brown hair cascading down to join her entrails as they were being voraciously taken from the skin of her stomach and devoured

like Danish delicacies. Her eyes, still intact, were opened, watching her killer eat her piece by piece, biting and swallowing until nothing was left. They were watching Will, too.

Even in death, she forgave neither of them.

The monster, its horns thick and tangled like briar bushes in January, sought no forgiveness to begin with, only solitude; and the moment it noticed it was no longer alone in the hallway, it turned its head to Will, its skull on a swivel as it turned and left the rest of his body and spine behind. With the blood still dripping from it's blackened chin, eyes murky like bone marrow and a sharp but crooked jawline that toed the line between human and animal, it stared down at him, waited for him to remember it. Will did not. He only stared at it, and it only stared at him, and with mechanical motions that made the bones in its arms creak and snap, it raised a single hand and pointed at him.

Again, Will's mother was dead and hanging, her true killer obvious and unabashed about itself.
And again, he could do nothing but run.

Quickly down in the opposite direction, Will took step by step backwards until his feet grew tired of taking the orders of his mind and chose to trip over themselves, leaving Will to stumble backwards and fall onto the floor Even then he did not stop in his moving, inching backwards on his hands and legs as the monster stood from its place seated by his mother's feet and turned the rest of its body towards him. Moving once each moment, a nimble and skeletal body cracking and creaking like rotted drywood, it walked towards him; and did not stop until a voice could be heard from the end of the hallway.

"Sir Graham?"

When Will turned towards the sound of his name, he found Georgia rushing to his side, the stagehand from days before standing idly behind her. When he turned back towards his adversary, he found it gone, along with his mother, and along with the blood that once ran rampant on the floor not but three feet away from him.

"Are you hurt?" Georgia had appeared next to him, now, a hand outstretched for him to take and stand again. "Have you fallen?"

It felt like a dream to see Georgia breathe there above him, a small torso pumping in and out along to the melodic reverberations of her inner mind's own circadian rhythms. In fact, it very well may have been; the vision of Georgia and that stagehand made just opaque enough to replace the sight of his mother hanging down from the hallway.

"Georgia." He said it once to ensure that he himself was still breathing, his throat thick like cotton in the roof of his mouth.

"Yes?"

"Georgia." He said it twice to discern her place in reality, rising slowly and staring out a far window to see whether or not he had fallen into the helpless Limbo, a consequence of finding faultlessness in the depths of his own self-deprecation and dishevelment.

"Georgia." A third time, now, as he put two clammy hands to her shoulders and squeezed until the linen fabric of her apron scrunched into the lines of his palms; to steady himself and feign the same mental completion he boasted of having before to Jack back when dreams remained dreams and bodies remained buried as they had been for years.
"Sir Graham, are you feeling well?"

"He's probably faking madness to get out of his chores, isn't he?" The stagehand spoke from beside her, disregarded in the most crucial moment but slowly appearing into focus as cloudy vignettes began to remove themselves from Will's peripheral. He remained unimportant regardless.

What was happening to him? The stag, and the little boy, and his mother; all fake images that were too real in the monent to deny their existence completely. It left a gaping hole in his heart to know that he slowly had begun to slip from the shore of reality and fade into the darkness that was madness without being the slightest bit privy to it, to know that there was no avoiding the man who he'd been cursed to become, to know that one day he would become that man and lose all sense of humanity whether he killed Hannibal or not. Moreover, whether he escaped the manor or not.

It had never been as clear as it had been today that Will stood on the edge of himself and leaned precariously into becoming *something*; or perhaps it had been clear since the origin of his predicament, but Will was too stupid and too headstrong to fully comprehend the magnitude of just what he had agreed to. In his mind, he told himself that he did in fact comprehend such a matter, had reprimanded himself on it, even; but was never truly aware of it, only watching the waves approach him from his periphreal but relinquishing all forms of safety on the shore. There was no one else he could trust, now that he'd pushed Jack away and watched him leave, and his options slipped in and out of his body like golden bullets he'd fired on himself. It was he deserved, for acting how he felt. It was what he deserved, for bearing the cross that came with being who he was.

But more than that, it was terrifying; as Will no longer knew if his thoughts were his own, or the thoughts of the thing that itched at the back of his brain and threatened to take him over.

"Sir Graham, if you'd like to sit-"
Will shook his head and held out a palm, distancing himself from Georgia quickly and avoiding the gaze of both of the figures who stood before him. "No, no, I-"

"I have to go."
And off he went, dashing past both Georgia and the stagehand in search of the only other person who could possibly be able to make sense of the situation he had found himself in.

Chapter End Notes

Will: I'm fine without you, Jack.
sees hallucination of dead mother five minutes later

On other notes, a lot of shit happens in this chapter! Hopefully y'all liked the faster pacing- it'll be here for a lil bit.

no. 13- Elemante

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Where do the restless go to sleep?

It was a question Will had found himself asking often, a knocking wonder that remained on the outside of his head and lingered atop his ear like a piece of cotton. It was a pointless question, and the answer was obvious once he really began thinking about it, but he asked it anyway; and even when he realized what the answer was, he'd ask himself the question again the next day. Just to get a different answer, a less vague one, an easier one to digest. The truth remained nonetheless.

The restless will go anywhere, as long as it means they finally get to escape the weight of the world around them.

"Clarice."

Will entered into Clarice's room and shut the door behind him almost immediately afterwards, sweat thick on his back like a sensation of sickness he couldn't get rid of. The room smelt of lilac and lavender, fresh flowers decorating the corners of the room that hadn't been there before. He wondered if those were hallucinations, too.

"What is it?" Clarice set a container of paintbrushes down on the table closest to her and approached Will's side with small steps.

"I think–"

Will looked to Clarice, who had put her soft hand on his back in the most comforting way she could, and looked down; to his shoes, to the shiny floor below them, and into the warped reflection that peered back at him from contorted marble. His throat felt uncomfortably damp when he swallowed.

"I think I'm going insane."

He paid close and meticulous attention to the way her face fell after he spoke, how her blonde eyebrows rested on the tops of her eyelids, how the corners of her lips drooped and sagged like dry apple seeds. "Come on, Will." She told him. "Sit down."

Will did as she commanded and sat on the closest ottoman she could lead him too, taking an iron pill for the sake of his own comfort and clasping the case back closed with a sharp snap that echoed through the canvases that leaned against the walls. She offered him a glass of water, which he politely declined, and only once the words had been completely absorbed did Clarice choose to speak again. She thought before she spoke, considered everything before she acted. He appreciated her caution. Likened it to his own.

“What made you think that, Will?”

“I saw her.” Will regretted declining the offer for water, his throat now dry and his hands over-active in his lap. “My mother. She was being eaten by something.” Eaten. His mother, who'd been dead for twelve years. It was an embarrassment to say out loud.

“In a dream?”

“No.” Will answered. “In… in real life. Or at least it felt like it.”

He rubbed his hands on the tops of his pants before he spoke, beads of sweat making his fingertips feel slippery. “I could smell the blood. I could hear the crunching of her organs in that thing’s mouth.”

Clarice stared at him. Just stood there, looking, arms folded. “You’re a smart man, Will. Think about this logically.”

"I'm trying." Will replied. "Really, I am."

Will didn't know why Clarice chose then to sit next to him, or why she put her hand on his shoulder and let it stay there, but he was comforted nonetheless. Everything about being there, with her, comforted him. And as they sat there, in silence, all Will did was focus on the sun rays that beamed in from the window and let the peace of the moment ease the bumps on his skin. Clarice was warm, and he could smell clean cotton and linen every time she shifted slightly in her seat. Will hadn't had a friend in a long, long time. He valued the simplicity of her company, even in times as complex as this one.

"I don't know what day it is. I haven't known what day it is for a long time."

He didn't know how long they'd been sitting there before he spoke again, didn't know if Clarice even wanted to hear what he'd say. But she didn't move, didn't say anything, and Will took it as an indication that it was fine to keep going. There was a lot Clarice tended to say in her silence.

"Sometimes, they mix together. Three days pass in the span of three hours. Sometimes they disappear completely, as if I hadn’t even lived them. As if I hadn’t been myself, or as if I’ve been living in a circle of time while the rest of the world moves in front of me.” The lines in his palms seemed to shift the more he looked at them, the more he thought about who he was and who he was becoming. "It feels like I'm outside of my body. I don't even recognize my own face when I look in the mirror."

“How long has this been happening, Will?” Her voice was cloudy and quiet, slightly scratchy. He could hear that scratchiness in her throat every time she said his name.

“I don’t know."

“And you never noticed your memory escaping like this until today?”

Will shifted in his seat, turned and looked at Clarice with a strange sort of smile on his face. “Is this your way of playing my psychologist?”

“If it were, I'd like to think I was doing a pretty good job of it." Clarice took her hand off of his shoulder and set it on top of her lap. Will was saddened by the distance. He associated it with the warmth that came from the room.

"How do you get used to being here without going insane?" He asked.

"You don't." Clarice replied. There was an emptiness in her voice that Will didn't like. "You simply find a way to manage your insanity."

He hummed and took the pill case out of his pocket, fiddling with it silently, opening and closing it with a sharp click each time. On the third *click* , Will could see her point at it out of the corner of his eye.

“Your pills. How long have you been taking them?”

“Long enough for them to have an effect.” He kept opening and closing, *click* after *click* until he finally clicked it closed. Clarice had asked for a reason. It took longer than Will felt was necessary for him to realize what the reason was. “Do you think?”

“I’m no detective, Will. I don't know what Hannibal will or won’t do.” Clarice had a habit of scrunching her nose in times like these, like a cat smelling citrus. “But he does have a penchant for medication.”

Clarice extended her hand, and Will set the pills in her palm just as she wanted. What she would do with them, Will didn't know; but if they were poisoned just as she said, it would be better if they were kept from Will's reach.

“Get some rest.” She set the pill case down on the endtable, looked back at Will with an expression he couldn't read. “Come back again tomorrow. If you're feeling better, then we'd know whether our theory is right.” Clarice tapped her nail on the top of the case twice, idly, and didn't take her eyes off of him.

"Whether your theory was right." Will murmured, but he stood up nonetheless.

“Will.”

Will looked down at her, noticed the faint freckles that sat on her nose like paint stains.

“Before you go, I wanted to warn you of something I neglected to mention earlier.” Clarice said, and ran a hand through her hair as she stood up to face him. He figured that she simply didn't want to look up at him, as women like Clarice were strong and prideful, and didn't like to look up to anyone. “Don’t do anything rash. If your hallucinations are as vivid as you say they are, it leaves room for error.”

“You think so little of me, Clarice.”

“It’s quite the opposite. I think too highly of you, Will.” Again, Clarice put her hand to his shoulder and rubbed her thumb along the bottom of his neck. “Much too highly.”

To be thought of at all, highly or otherwise, was enough for Will.

Will gave a slow, small smile and walked out of the door, leaving Clarice to her own devices. He didn't like to do things like this, to make people worry about him and wonder whether or not he was completely insane. Clarice was as understanding as she could have been, and felt for him, but Will still felt ashamed. Almost insane. And Will couldn't afford to have Clarice think he was incapable, too. He was fine, just fine, and could shake whatever feelings he had then right off of him with a sip of scotch and a nap in his bedroom.

He had finally approached the door to his room when he heard a distinct voice call to him from down the hallway; and he could barely tell whether it was 'real' or not. The closer she got, the clearer that question became.

"Sir Graham?" Georgia smiled and hurried towards him, small feet making quick taps on the floor. "How are you feeling?"

"Better, now." He replied. "And I'm sorry for my behavior, earlier. I was out of sorts."

Georgia shook her head in defiance of even the thought of it. "Don't apologize, Sir. This manor could make anyone go mad, really. I think it's haunted."

There was much more truth to that than she thought.

“If you ever need anything, I’m here to help you.” Georgia continued. "We have to stick together, here."

It took Will a while to respond, to think of the proper thing to say.

“Thank you, Georgia. I am truly sorry to be a burden to you like this.”

It was an earnest apology. In a sudden motion, Will hugged her-- wrapped his arms around her frail little waist and felt as she did the same. He'd gotten nearly as thin as her, taller still; and when he pulled away, he set a hand down on Georgia's shoulder. “I apologize, for being such a burden on you.”

“You’re not a burden, Will.” Georgia shook her head. “You could never be.”

With her hands now at her side, she gave him a quick nod and looked back towards the hallway. Before she left, she looked at him one last time.

“Try to get some rest, alright? I’ll do the rest of your chores for you.”

Georgia scurried off and left Will to enter into his bedroom, and the exchange ended just as swiftly as it began. There was only him, now; now that Jack had left, Georgia had gone to work, and Clarice had sent him to rest until the shock of the day subsided. Will didn't know if the shock would ever subside, but he kept that secret from both Clarice and himself.

Still, that uncanny feeling stayed slick on his skin, the same feeling that had plagued him ever since he'd first met Hannibal on that dreadful night. It only grew worse when Georgia was a safe distance away, none the wiser to the missing key that now sat in the palm of Will’s hands.

Insane or not, Will still had to prove to someone that he could accomplish the goal at hand.

Even if he no longer knew who he was proving himself to.

Chapter End Notes

I crawled up from the dead to upload this, yall. dont let the rumors fool you-- purgatory is actually pretty comfortable.

either way, again, we're back. sorry for the delay.
there's a bit of a writing style change here, too. it probably won't stick around.

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!